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# Review of

## *Egalitarian Liberalism Revisited: On the Meaning and Justification of Social Justice*

Per Sundman

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*Review by Bharat Ranganathan*

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Across a range of contemporary disciplines, discussions about justice abound. Despite the prevalence of these discussions, however, there is little consensus about what justice is and whether (and, if so, how) appeals to it should be made. Moreover, if the interconnectedness and pluralism that obtain in our rapidly globalizing world are taken seriously, concerns about the content, meaning, and use of justice are amplified. Against this backdrop, Per Sundman aims to explicate and evaluate one particular form of justice: egalitarian liberalism. On his definition, egalitarian liberalism is “best understood as a triune conjunction of equality of opportunity, desert and self-ownership” (10). Over the course of eight substantive chapters, Sundman labors to show how these criteria both reinforce and don’t contradict each other, aiming to clarify the meaning of social justice while considering known alternatives.

To develop this argument, Sundman covers a truly impressive range of topics in contemporary debates about justice, including consequentialism and deontology, equality of opportunity and equality of resources, capabilities and rights, corrective and distributive policies, the natural and social lotteries, status in moral and political communities, and the politics of recognition and misrecognition. On the whole, covering such a range of topics proves to be a strength. Sundman introduces the reader to a number of important topics and how several important thinkers have treated those topics, and his discussion of these topics and thinkers is evenhanded and insightful. If you’re

familiar with (and interested in) one or more of these debates, you will be delighted to find a theological ethicist engaging in them. There's also a further reason for delight: Sundman enters and engages in these debates without bringing the all-too-frequent (and oftentimes empty) charge that liberalism is "impoverished"—a point to which I'll return. But depending on your level of familiarity with recent debates in moral and political philosophy, you may be left unsatisfied with some aspects of Sundman's discussion. Specifically, some of these topics and thinkers deserve further attention and scrutiny than Sundman provides,

I do want to draw the reader's attention to the penultimate chapter of Sundman's book, "Save Us from Liberalism." But first I want to make a larger point. I mentioned what I think is an all-too-frequent charge made in theological ethics: namely, that liberalism is impoverished. Sometimes, this charge is entirely warranted. But oftentimes, at least in my experience, it is empty: the person bringing the charge neither distinguishes among the diversity that obtains within liberalism nor charitably reads and represents the thinker with whom they are trying to engage. Given this disciplinary shortcoming, Sundman is to be commended for turning to Christian critiques of liberalism only after he's carefully worked (and guided the reader) through the myriad topics and thinkers that constitute egalitarian liberalism writ large.

So what about this chapter in particular? Focusing on Christian communitarians—for example, Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank—Sundman explores whether *authentic* Christian ethics contradicts and is superior to egalitarian liberalism. In the first half of the chapter, he examines the different ways in which Christian communitarians understand obedience to God's commands and have criticized the putative liberal obsession with "autonomy." Following an important discussion where he contrasts Christian and liberal understandings of the circumstances of justice, the second half of Sundman's chapter argues briefly but persuasively against Christian exclusivity (e.g., the recently popular Benedict Option) and for Christians to act out *of* love, *for* justice, and *in* the world.

There is much to recommend about this book. Both substantively and structurally, it is admirable and instructive.