

What the American Founders Meant by Equality

The Declaration of Independence famously proclaimed that “all men are created equal.” Thanks in part to that prestigious endorsement, “equality” has become a widely held social ideal.

But what most modern-day egalitarians promote is far removed from the kind of equality that the authors of the Declaration were referring to.

Many today invoke “equality” to deny any variation in qualities among individuals, or in the resulting qualitative tendencies among sets of similar individuals. They condemn any acknowledgment of differences in aptitude, ability, character, and accomplishment as an affront to equality.

Many also call for “equality of outcome.” They regard inequality of outcomes—of wealth, income, services, treatment by private individuals, etc—as a moral outrage to be rectified.

This is sometimes based on “equality” in the “quality variation denial” sense discussed above. The argument is that, since everyone is “equal” in their qualities, any inequality of outcome must be a consequence of injustice and bigotry.

Alternatively, “equality of outcome” is itself posited to be the sense of “equality” that matters most, and thus an ideal in and of itself.

But the authors of the Declaration of Independence didn’t mean any of that when they proclaimed that “all men are created equal.” What they did mean is what the English political philosopher [John Locke](#) meant when he made the same claim in his [Two Treatises of Government](#). This can be inferred from the well-established historical fact that the founders revered

Locke's political philosophy and from the text and context of the Declaration itself.

The reference to equality occurs at the beginning of a line of reasoning used to justify the American people throwing off the British government. And that line of reasoning mirrors the line of reasoning used by Locke to justify the right of *any* people to cast off *any* tyrannical government.

As such, Locke's syllogism for revolution also begins with an appeal to equality.

Locke wrote that all humans are "born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same faculties." He did not claim that the *level* of our faculties (or capabilities) are all the same, just that the *type* of faculties we have use of are. For example, as humans, we all have the faculty of reason. That does not mean that we are all equally reasonable.

From the premise that all humans are created/born equal in that specific sense, Locke derived the conclusion that they "should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection..."

Locke referred to this as the "equality of men by nature." It is contrary to human nature for any human to subjugate another. And Locke specified what he meant by "subjection" when he wrote that "being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions..."

So, from the natural equality of humans, Locke derived rights: meaning the inviolability of an individual's person and property.

And from rights, Locke derived the notion that legitimate governments are instituted by the people "for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates."

And from his theory of legitimate government, Locke derived the right of the people to disobey and throw off any governments that “endeavor to grasp themselves, or put into the hands of any other an Absolute Power over the Lives, Liberties, and Estates of the People” and thus become tyrannical and illegitimate.

In sum, Locke reasoned from equality to rights to legitimate government to tyranny to revolution. And you can see this exact line of reasoning in the Declaration’s philosophical justification for throwing off the despotic British government (emphasis added):

*“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created **equal**, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable **Rights**, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, **Governments** are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes **destructive** of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to **abolish** it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”*

It is highly unlikely that the authors of the Declaration of Independence would so closely follow Locke’s logical reasoning from “equality” and mean something entirely different by “equality.” And Locke did not mean “equality” in the modern egalitarian sense.

So, we can say with confidence that the American founders were not proto-leftist egalitarians. It is far more likely that they agreed with Voltaire, another devotee of Locke, who wrote, as quoted by Will Durant in [The Story of Philosophy](#):

“Those who say that all men are equal speak the greatest truth if they mean that all men have an equal right to

liberty, to the possession of their goods, and to the protection of the laws'; but 'equality is at once the most natural and the most chimerical thing in the world: natural when it is limited to rights, unnatural when it attempts to level goods and powers.'"

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