

Good Intentions

By Nature Equal. By John E. Coons and Patrick M. Brennan. *Princeton University Press*. 362 pp. \$39.50.

Reviewed by Robert T. Miller

By Nature Equal is a bold and original book. Both authors are law professors—Coons at Boalt Hall at Berkeley, Brennan at Arizona State University—but their book has little to do with the law. Instead it ranges widely over moral philosophy, the history of ideas, and Christian theology, with passing glances at topics as diverse as scholastic metaphysics, the sociology of academia, the idea of progress, and the possibilities for world government.

The central question is that of human equality understood descriptively. That is, the authors are inquiring into the sense in which human beings can truly be said to be, in fact, equal. They distinguish this inquiry from the more familiar normative one concerning the ways in which governments are obligated to treat individuals equally. Everyone who agrees with Coons and Brennan about the tediousness and sterility of the literature on the latter issue will applaud their decision to strike out into undiscovered country.

The analysis begins with the logic of relations. If one thing is said to be equal to another, this is because the two things are related to each other in a particular way, the relation arising from the fact that they have some underlying property in common. We might say, for instance, that Socrates and Plato are equal in that both were Athenian citizens. Some properties underlying equalities, however, can be had in degrees, while others cannot. The property of being an Athenian citizen, for example, does not admit of degrees, whereas the property of intelligence does. If two things have the former kind of property in common, Coons and Brennan say that they are related by a single equality; if they have the latter kind of property in common, and, in addition, have that property to the same degree (e.g., Socrates and Plato are not only intelligent but equally intelligent), then the authors say that they are related by a double equality. Since “common possession [of a property] in itself is an unimportant connection between two beings,” single equalities are “generally of little importance, and most, indeed, are trivial.” Since human equality is undeniably important, Coons and Brennan think it must be a double equality.

This is a dubious move, for importance is always relative to the purpose at hand: in distributing Purple Hearts, what counts is that each recipient was wounded, whether seriously or otherwise, but in apportioning medical care, what counts is how seriously each was wounded. The authors conclude perhaps too quickly that human equality must be a double equality, not a single one.

Coons and Brennan next set out in search of the property underlying that equality. Relying on their sense of what ordinary people implicitly believe about equality, they intend their account to be just an elaborated version of a concept already present in the common understanding. They argue that “human equality is the relation arising from the uniform capacity of rational persons to perfect themselves morally by committing to the search for the real lateral good.” That is, the authors believe in an objective moral order that determines how human beings ought to treat one another (they call this the real lateral good), and they think that all human beings with some minimal intellectual capacity are equally able both to form honest—though perhaps wildly

erroneous—judgments about what this order requires and to intend to act on these judgments, though with no assurance of outward success.

There are three key points here. First, Coons and Brennan's moral philosophy is emphatically one of good intentions: what counts morally is that, after diligently inquiring what the objective moral order entails, the agent intends what he honestly thinks that order requires of him; it is morally irrelevant that he might be mistaken as to what the moral order really requires. The authors thus reject the view, shared by philosophers as unlike as Aquinas and Hume, that there are some moral truths that all human beings with normal mental faculties are responsible for knowing. Second, any action undertaken with a good intention is morally perfecting: it makes the agent a better person, even if, objectively, it works incalculable harm to others. The authors are remarkably consistent on this point: "Given certain bizarre psychological assumptions, Hitler might be the moral equivalent (or even superior) of Mother Teresa."

Taken together, these two points imply the third: a person's moral worth is completely independent of his knowledge of the objective moral quality of any particular kinds of behavior. The only knowledge needed to advance in moral perfection is the understanding that there exists a real order of obligations within which one must in good faith seek to treat others correctly. The authors deride as "gnosticism" any moral system that makes an agent's moral worth depend on his knowledge of the rightness or wrongness of specific kinds of actions.

For Coons and Brennan, human equality requires a theory such as theirs because, if the agent's moral worth as a person in any way depended on his actions actually conforming to the objective order (and not just to the agent's perhaps wildly mistaken understanding of that order), then human beings would not have an equal opportunity for moral perfection because factors like inherent intellectual ability, education, environment, and luck would give some human beings greater possibilities for moral perfection than others. In particular, any gnostic theory is incompatible with human equality.

Coons and Brennan advert to most of the obvious objections to their position, but some of their responses could be more complete. For instance, as the authors are well aware, making human equality dependent on a person's capacity for moral perfection excludes from equality all those who, through illness or injury, have lost the use of reason, even though they are "beings who are obviously human." The authors justify the exclusion by saying that if all human beings enjoyed human equality, equality would lose "the moral dimension commonly ascribed" to it, and "the popular recognition of equality's importance [would become] quite unintelligible, shrinking the concept to a single equality based on a property that could not vary—the property of birth to human parents."

Here Coons and Brennan are again making the dubious assumption that all single equalities are unimportant. When we learn later that persons have value principally as free moral agents able to answer the call of conscience and that "dignity arises essentially from . . . the relation of human equality," the problem ramifies. The authors aver that "incurably nonrational humans," while not having dignity, deserve "respectful treatment" and "do not slip into the status of animals and would deserve protection on religious or other grounds." But what these grounds are, they do not say, and they disclaim any intention of providing such an account in the present book. The cumulative effect—obviously unintentional on the part of the authors—is to imply an invidious

distinction between persons and mere human animals, much like that drawn by some apologists for abortion.

Weakness of the will provides another possible problem for the authors' view. For it seems clear that people have differing capacities to resist their impulses, overcome temptations, and stick to their good resolutions. A recovering alcoholic and a teetotaler do not have equal capacities to resist the liquid demon; some of us are tempted like St. Anthony in the desert, while others are but lightly tempted. So it would seem that human beings do not after all have a uniform capacity to choose the perceived good, a result that by the argument of Coons and Brennan implies that people are not actually equal. The authors could argue, perhaps, that while alcoholics and teetotalers have differing capacities to resist the desire to drink, on the whole their various weaknesses balance out, but this is implausible. Curiously, the authors mention weakness of the will in a footnote but do not think it relevant to their notion of equality.

In the second half of the book, Coons and Brennan ask which of the major Western philosophers and Christian theologians can consistently believe in the notion of human equality they have elaborated. The authors think that most philosophers and theologians have been infected with gnosticism in various forms, and they see themselves as following Kant in vindicating the beliefs of common people against intellectual elites. It turns out that the foes of equality greatly outnumber its friends. Virtually alone among Western philosophers, Kant and Bernard Lonergan can consistently believe in human equality, while theologians do only slightly better. Here, the authors think that a Christian theology is consistent with equality only if both God and the individual soul have meaningful active roles to play in salvation—God through His grace, the soul through free will responding to that grace. As the authors apply this standard, only Alphonsus Liguori, John Henry Newman, John Courtney Murray, Karl Rahner, and the fathers of the Second Vatican Council pass the test; Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Barth, Thielicke, perhaps Pope John Paul II, and a host of others fail.

Getting the views of all these thinkers right is a vast scholarly project, of course, and it takes the authors outside their usual areas of expertise. In treating some thinkers, they sometimes rely heavily on secondary sources, and there are some inevitable errors. For instance, the authors dispose of an inconvenient passage in Aquinas' *Quodlibetal* 3 by saying it is an early work that was later repudiated; but most scholars agree it was written in Lent of 1270, which makes it quite late in Aquinas' career. Specialists will find fault on several other particular points.

Some of the errors, however, are more substantive. I take just one, the authors' treatment of Aquinas on predestination. Here, according to the authors, the freedom with which Thomas credits man is insufficient to sustain human equality because "from eternity God has chosen some to receive His grace and to be brought thereby to heavenly glory. These are the elect, whom God has predestinated," while "those whom God has not elected and predestinated, by contrast, fall into reprobation." Hence, "when man does good, it is through God's active agency; when man authors evil, it is in his own name." In other words, as the authors see it, Aquinas left no room for man's free will in the economy of salvation; there's little difference between Aquinas and Calvin. Later the authors admit that they "do not understand how Aquinas' account of freedom . . . can be reconciled with his deterministic conclusions . . . regarding the manner of our salvation."

And it can't be, because Coons and Brennan have misunderstood Aquinas on predestination. There are many subtleties here, the chief being that Aquinas is concerned with showing that nothing man does causes anything in God (e.g., His bestowing of grace), not that nothing man does has any causal relation to his own salvation. But the overarching problem is that Coons and Brennan, understandably but mistakenly, concentrate almost entirely on Aquinas' treatment of predestination in the First Part of the *Summa Theologiae*, which does not directly address the issue in which they are interested. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 159, by contrast, Aquinas is explicit: although a man may neither merit grace nor call it forth from God by an act of his free choice, nevertheless God offers grace to all men without exception, and it is within the scope of man's free choice to accept it or reject it; only those who freely choose to reject grace do not receive it. Less excusably, the authors cite Aquinas' commentary on the Gospel of John as supporting their reading of Aquinas, when in fact the very sections they cite repeat the analysis from the *Summa Contra Gentiles* at great length and even apply it to the gentiles who lived before the coming of Christ.

But these errors and omissions notwithstanding, *By Nature Equal* is a daring and provocative book. In turning their attention to descriptive equality, Coons and Brennan provide a cleansing tonic to the interminable and vapid academic discussions of political egalitarianism. More importantly, in descriptive equality they have found and begun to explore a neglected and philosophically interesting concept. Their conclusions will not satisfy everyone, but the book will be a starting point for any who subsequently consider these issues. The historical sections are an earnest attempt by nonspecialists to trace a philosophically important idea through centuries of philosophical debate and, despite some wrong turns, represent a great intellectual effort.

Even apart from issues of human equality, the book neatly focuses attention on a nice and neglected philosophical question, namely, whether those who do evil by honestly misunderstanding the moral order should be reckoned on a par with those who, equally honestly, do good. A book of philosophy that merely asks an important and neglected question succeeds. By working out a serious answer, Coons and Brennan have done even more.