

Fairness and Equality Assembly

I would like us to think about fairness and equality this morning. To illustrate the theme, here is the sort of problem a Head Master often faces. Three pupils have done something wrong – let's say they decided to skip lessons one afternoon and go to sit by the lakes. They have all done the same wrong thing, so they should all get the same punishment, right?

But what if one of them has a medical condition, which means that the child is impulsive and cannot control themselves in ways the other children can? What if another of the children has done this before and has already been given a final warning not to step out of line again? What if the third child is going through personal difficulties that mean they are particularly vulnerable at the moment?

Maybe it doesn't make sense to give the same punishment for the same action after all. Something more thoughtful and complex might be needed. If we want the pupils to flourish in the same way, perhaps we might have to treat them unequally. In philosophical terms, the trade-off is between 'equality of treatment', when each pupil is treated in the same way but important differences between them are ignored, and 'equality of care', when each pupil is cared for according to their special circumstances, and each gets a different outcome.

If you ask any schoolboy what they value in teachers and at their school, they will put fairness close to the top. But being fair - treating people equally - is difficult. No matter how hard we try to be fair, we find contradictions in our path. Because people and their circumstances differ, there is a trade-off between treating people equally and treating them "as equals."

The complexities of being fair are especially frustrating because it is so obvious when things are not fair. Just look around you. There is inequality at every level of our society. And it's not just about politics. It used to be that our day-to-day life was pretty fair – the British are famous for queuing and we behaved as if there weren't many differences among us. Today, there are "premiere" lines for popcorn at the cinema and different tiers of Uber cars. We are still struggling to address obvious inequalities of all kinds based on race, gender and poverty. Inequality and unfairness is everywhere, and is so obvious.

Maybe unfairness is built in. Look at the human race in general – it is pretty clear that people are not equal. Think about the many differences between people. There are old and young, men and women, rich and poor, sick and healthy. People are also marked by differences of skill, experience, creativity, and virtue. So in what sense are people "equal"? We want to say that we are, we might deeply believe it, but how can we *argue* it?

We might try to argue that there are various superficial differences between people, but deep down, we are actually all equal. So no matter how successful or powerful you become, on a fundamental level, you are no better than anyone else. But where is this deep equality found? Some say it is because we all have the ability to think and reason - but intelligence is not very evenly distributed. Some base equality on our moral sense and capacity to be good – but we all know that some people in the world aren't good. Some suggest that it is our capacity to suffer that equalizes us - but then, many animals suffer, too.

Others have picked out our capacity to love - but what about selfish, hard-hearted people? The argument is easier to make if you take a religious angle – equality exists because we are all made in God’s image, because God cares about how things turn out for each of us.

Perhaps there is no one thing that makes us equal; there’s only a patchwork of overlapping arguments for our deeper equality, powerful as a group but individually lacking. How strange that we instinctively know that discrimination and bigotry are wrong, that fairness is right, but find it so hard to pin down the basis for that belief.

It might be that we are thinking on too large a scale. Perhaps it is easier to invent local rules for fairness that fit particular circumstances. To me, it feels wrong to allow people to jump queues at funfairs, but it is obvious to me that a hospital should routinely give some patients priority over others. By that I mean that it would be wrong for a hospital to treat people differently according to whether they were rich or poor, but entirely right to give preference to those who were more sick over those who are less sick. Maybe all that matters is that whatever scheme of fairness we are running, it makes sense to those involved in it.

We started with something everyone in the room might claim to be able to recognise – fairness. Underpinning the question ‘What is fair?’ came the question of equality. Truthfully, things have got a little complicated since then. Perhaps we make things a little better by giving up on finding a single answer and instead using four ideas: equality, getting what you deserve, people helping each other and being helped in turn, and need. Each of these four becomes important in different contexts, to solve different kinds of problems. Citizens are all the same before the law - equality. Workers, by contrast, should be paid differently, depending on what they have accomplished – getting what you deserve. In friendships and relationships, we look to support each other – helping others and being helped. Finally, in trying to do right by our children, we ask what they need.

To go back to those three naughty pupils at the start of the assembly, in deciding how to punish them, I might go through the four ideas and ask questions. Should I treat them all equally? What does each of them deserve? What contribution do they make to the school or their fellow pupils? What do these children need to correct their bad behaviour? None of those four principles are strong enough to serve in every situation; in fact, they are often in tension with one another. But together, they might just do.

In real life, therefore, to find fairness we muddle through and apply different rules. For example, the teachers running sports teams here don’t pick the team by treating everyone exactly equally: to win, we must pick the best players more often. But the teacher cannot run a ruthless meritocracy, either. On a good team, players get the help they need, they assist one another reciprocally, they’re rewarded for their individual accomplishments, and they are treated similarly enough that they feel connected in a common enterprise.

The frustrations and complexities of finding fairness shows the hidden complexity of equality. We feel as though it is simple and self-evident, mostly because we all recognise unfairness instinctively and keenly. But achieving fairness requires a willingness to recognize, and to shift among, many different conceptions of what’s right. It’s harder than it looks. There are lots of different ways of being fair, equal and just.

The main thing is to keep trying, and keep thinking. It might surprise you to discover how many obvious and simple things in the world, things that you take for granted, are actually pretty complicated. And if, here at school, we sometimes seem to get it wrong, it might be that we are applying a different concept of fairness to the one you have in your mind. Of course, with such a complicated matter, we might just have got it wrong.