

Excerpt from *Animal Farm* by George Orwell

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This unit is based on a passage from Chapter III of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. In the Penguin Modern Classics edition (first published 1951), it is found on pp 26–29 (from the paragraph starting “All through that summer the work on the farm went like clockwork” and finishing “... but the sparrows kept their distance”). Of course, some familiarity with the whole plot – the rebellion of the animals against Farmer Jones before this, and the way the revolution turns out afterwards – will enhance your students' appreciation of the passage.

In this passage – the first summer after the rebellion threw out Farmer Jones – the animals are trying to put into practice the ideas of Major, the old boar who incited them to revolt. These had been condensed into the Seven Commandments:

1. Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy.
2. Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings, is a friend.
3. No animal shall wear clothes.
4. No animal shall sleep in a bed.
5. No animal shall drink alcohol.
6. No animal shall kill any other animal.
7. All animals are equal.

The passage raises questions about power, who should rule, social organization, democracy and – above all – equality.

Equality is a highly contested concept: that is, many ways of characterizing equality have been advanced, and they are not all compatible. Before using this excerpt from *Animal Farm*, you might find it well worthwhile using the *Harrison Bergeron* activity which is also available on this site – or, at least, reading the analysis of the different ways of characterizing *equality* that are detailed there. A similar discussion of what equality means could arise from this text.

Equality

The seventh commandment states that all animals are equal (which is famously changed to “All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others” by the end of the book).

The ideal of equality can become particularly problematic when it comes to sharing the workload, in the light of differences in the animals' abilities and needs. Your students are likely to be able to identify many of the issues that arise, though the following questions may allow you to assist them in unpacking and exploring those issues.

1. Are all the animals equal in this passage?
2. In the passage, who gives – and what do they give?
3. In the passage, who gets – and what do they get?
4. Do all the animals work as hard as each other?

5. Should all the animals do exactly the same amount or type – of work, in order to be equal?
6. Should all the animals work to the best of their ability, in order to be equal?
7. Should all the animals get exactly the same amount of food, or rest, in order to be equal?
8. If one animal – like Boxer – gives more than they need to, should they get more than they would otherwise get?
9. Boxer gives hard physical work. The pigs give their cleverness. How can we judge whether the amounts they give are equal?
10. If someone has greater abilities than others, do they deserve more? More of what? If someone has lesser abilities than others, do they deserve less? Less of what?
11. How should a society deal with the fact that not everybody has the same abilities?
12. If everyone is to be equal, what should be the relationship between what you give and what you get?

The Free Rider problem

Whenever people (or animals) have to give to a common cause, and then receive some benefits from the common pool, some will seek to get the benefits without giving their fair share. This is often referred to as the free rider problem.

A literal example of a free rider is someone who dodges paying the fare on public transport, when it is the fares that allow the transport to run in the first place. Another example would be someone who avoids paying tax, but uses public facilities paid for by taxes. In the passage, several animals are free riders, at least to some extent – the mare Mollie and the cat.

One way around the free rider problem that we increasingly see is to make everyone pay for all the benefits they use – the ‘user pays’ principle. For some benefits, there may be practical problems with paying every time you use that benefit. We can imagine the difficulties of paying for exactly how much you use the roads every time you take a car out. However, new technologies may help solve such problems.

From the point of view of equality, a more serious problem with user pays is that some people are unable to pay. All benefits would become private benefits, with those unable to pay missing out. Again, there may be solutions: giving some free passes, or discounts.

Notice that one’s attitude to the free rider problems turns on which conception of equality is accepted. If we believe that *equality* means *equality of opportunity*, then even under a strict user pays principle, everyone is equal. No-one is banned from gaining any benefit they want – they just have to be able to pay for it. Underlying the whole question of what equality means is the question of the balance in a society between individuals and their rights, and communities and their care for others.

1. Why did Mollie often seem to be a late riser and often have a stone in her hoof?
2. Why was the cat never around when work was to be done?

3. The wild animals, when "treated with generosity, simply took advantage of it" – what, if anything, did the farm animals owe to the wild animals?
4. If some do not work as hard as they are able to, should they be given things according to how much they need?
5. Are there some things that everybody should have, whether they contribute or not?
6. If some are not contributing as much as they could, what should the rest do?

What is the best way to organise society?

Animal Farm is, of course, a parable about the Russian Revolution, communist government and the slow collapse of its ideals that followed. The excerpt here details the way the farm was organized soon after the revolution.

There are two aspects to the form of social organization the animals have adopted after the rebellion. Firstly, they have a strong idea of equality, as explored in the previous section. Secondly, every animal attends the meetings and has the right to both put forward resolutions and to vote on them. We might characterize such a government as democratic socialism.

This is a form of democracy, but it differs from the sort of democracy we have in advanced western societies. It might seem that democracy is a simple idea – “government of the people, by the people, for the people” as Lincoln famously put it in his Gettysburg address – but there can be many ways in which it is implemented, each with advantages and problems.

Animal Farm advances a version that is, in many respects, very similar to the original democracy in ancient Athens – though there citizenship was restricted to adult, free males. All attend meetings, all may put up motions, all vote, and the decision is decided on each motion by the bare majority. Our democracy is very different. While all adult citizens may vote, they vote only for their representatives (e.g. Members of Parliament), who then can propose and vote on new laws. Generally speaking, western democracies insist that a new law is approved by two separate bodies or houses (and in the UK, the upper house is not even elected). Moreover, there are restrictions on what these new laws can do, often (but not in the UK) written into a Constitution. A separate body – the highest court of law in the country – can rule out laws that contravene these restrictions.

Therefore, we can make some contrasts between different concepts of democracy:

- Direct (everyone can vote on every proposal) vs representative (only elected representatives vote directly on proposals);
- Majoritarian (where the majority’s decision automatically becomes law) vs constitutional (where there are limits on possible laws);
- Constitutional democracies can be liberal (where citizens have certain rights or freedoms that may not be taken away by parliament) vs defensive (citizens are not allowed certain freedoms if they are seen as a threat to the state).

In many ways, these variations can be seen as different ways to strike a balance between the equality of all citizens, and the freedom of individuals.

Of course, there are other forms of government too. *Animal Farm* asks us to contrast democracy with dictatorship: both of Farmer Jones before the revolution, and of the pigs by the end of the book. If your students have not read the whole book, then they will not know about the latter, but it seems likely that they will be able to map out pretty clearly the situation under Farmer Jones.

Here are some questions that may help you guide discussion about such matters.

Types of government

1. What sort of government did the farm have before Farmer Jones was overthrown? Who had the power? How was it exercised? What sort of input did others have? Whose interests were being served?
2. What sort of government did the farm have after the revolution? Who had the power? How was it exercised? What sort of input did others have? Whose interests were being served?
3. What would be the ideal way of organising the farm? Who would have power? How would it be exercised? What sort of input would the members of the community have? Whose interests would be served?
4. Would your idea for organising a farm be good ones for organising your country? If not, why not? What changes might need to be made?

Democracy, equality, freedom and power

1. In what ways were all the animals equal in the Meeting on Sundays? In what ways were they unequal?
2. Does allowing everyone to propose resolutions ensure equality?
3. Does allowing everyone a vote ensure equality?
4. Does democracy require that everyone have an equal say?
5. Does democracy require that everyone have an equal vote on every issue?
6. If an animal didn't agree with the decision of a Meeting, what could they do? If you don't agree with a new law what can you do?
7. If an animal thought the decision of a Meeting would stop them doing something they wanted, what could they do? If a new law stops you doing what you want, what can you do?
8. If an animal thought the decision of a Meeting would cause them harm, what could they do? If a new law causes you harm, what can you do?
9. What is true democracy?

You could also look at the *Six IAPC Activities on Democracy* to be found elsewhere on p4c.com.