

12. Equity

Etymology: Early-14th c., *equite*, ‘quality of being equal or fair, impartiality’; late-14th c., ‘that which is equally right or just to all concerned’, from Old French *equite* (13th c.), from Latin *aequitatem* (nominative *aequitas*) ‘the uniform relation of one thing to others, equality, conformity, symmetry’; also ‘just or equitable conduct toward others’, from *aequus* ‘even, just, equal’ (see *equal* (adj.)).

In law, ‘fairness in the adjustment of conflicting interests; the settlement of controversies by the dictates of good conscience’ (*natural equity*), late-14th c., from Roman *naturalis aequitas*, the general principles of justice which corrected or supplemented the legal codes (‘governed by benevolence, while *justitia* yields to another only what is strictly due’, Lewis & Short).

Hence, in England and the US, also ‘justice based on such principles, the system of jurisprudence as to what is fair and what is not’, and ‘a court or jurisdiction in which these doctrines are applied’ (1590s).

The Latin word also meant ‘a quiet, tranquil state of mind; moderation, evenness of temper.’

The L. *aequitas* was somewhat influenced in meaning by being adopted as the ordinary rendering of Gr. *ἐπιεικεία* ..., which meant reasonableness and moderation in the exercise of one’s rights, and the disposition to avoid insisting on them too rigorously [Oxford English Dictionary].

From the 1620s as ‘an equitable right, that to which one is justly entitled’, especially a right recognised by courts of *equity* that is not provided for in the common or statute law (such as certain property rights of wives). *Equities*, ‘the ordinary shares of a limited company’, carrying certain rights to assets and profits, is attested by 1904.

By the 1980s, it had taken on extended senses in sociology, such as ‘allocating benefits in various policy fields in such a way as to provide groups, persons, and places with at least a minimum level of benefits so as to satisfy basic needs’ [Stuart S. Nagel, ‘*Equity* as a Policy Goal’, 1983].¹

Suggestions for value-specific questions in VISION dialogues

- What is equity?
- How is equity affected?
- In what ways could it make sense to say that equity has something to do with our relationships to other living species or to the planet?
- How do you know if equity is present?
- What does it mean to be benevolent?
- If equity is a matter of sensing what is fair, who has the power to decide what that means?
- Does equity have any problems?
- If we say that there is something wrong with equity, what could that be?
- If power will not listen, how can equity find its way?
- What kind of soil provides a good conscience and the best conditions in which to thrive?
- If equity could speak, what would it say?

¹ Extract compiled from <https://www.etymonline.com/word/equity>, last accessed 1 May 2026. Note here that references appearing in the etymology text box or in square brackets are taken directly from the source.

Suggestions for exercises and creative activities to inspire a VISION reflection

Concept spotting

Duration: 60 minutes to 2 hours

Description: Go to a museum, a park, or somewhere else with a lot of diversity. Walk around in small groups or pairs, finding examples of equality, sameness, inequality, and equity for at least 20 minutes. Give participants the etymology of each of the concepts for which they are looking. Instruct them to take pictures of the pieces they find which resemble the concepts. Gather the group together again and let each person find a new partner with whom to share their findings. End the exercise with a group discussion about what they noticed during the trip.