

## **When Does Equality Matter?**

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### **Lecture 1: Introduction**

Our country, and the world, are marked by extraordinarily high levels of inequality. This inequality raises important empirical questions, about what laws and policies generate this degree of inequality, about what changes in laws and policies might reduce it, and about what other effects these changes would have. It also raises important normative questions. There is widespread, although not unanimous agreement that this inequality is a problem. But it is not clear why—what reasons there are for objecting to inequality and for reducing or eliminating it if possible. Gaining a better understanding of these reasons is the aim of this book.

One reason for wanting to redistribute resources from the rich to the poor is simply that this is a way of making the poor better off, at relatively small cost to the welfare of the rich. Reasons of this kind can be very compelling. But although they are reasons for doing what would have the effect of reducing inequality, they are at base reasons for increasing the well-being of the poor rather than reasons for reducing *inequality*, that is to say, reducing the difference between the well-being of some and that of others. The fact that there are people who are much better off than the poor is relevant to this rationale for redistribution only for the reason Willie Sutton was said to have given when asked why he robbed banks: “That’s where the money is.”

Genuinely egalitarian reasons, by contrast, are comparative: they are reasons for reducing the difference between what some have and what others have. My focus in what follows will be on egalitarian reasons of this kind, not because they are more important than humanitarian reasons—often they are not—but because they are more puzzling.

A concern with equality can be made to seem arbitrary. Robert Nozick, for example, famously charged that a concern with equality is a concern with a particular pattern of distribution, which can be maintained only by interfering with the liberty of individuals to make choices, take risks and enter into contracts that would deviate from that pattern.<sup>1</sup> Why, he asked, should we try to maintain an arbitrary pattern of distribution at the cost of constant interference with individual liberty?

When the idea that there is a conflict between equality and liberty is put in this abstract way, equality seems immediately at a disadvantage. It is obvious that interference with liberty is something people have reason to object to: no one wants to be deprived of options that he or she values, or to be told what to do by others. But it is less clear what reasons there are for objecting to inequality.

It has thus often been charged that demands for greater equality are just expressions of envy that the “have nots” feel toward the “haves.” It is easy to understand why people should wish that their own lives were better. But what reason do they have to be concerned with the difference between their lives and that of others?

Indeed, given that an objection to inequality is an objection to the *difference* between what some have and what others have, it might seem to follow that such an objection would not hold, or not hold as strongly, if the difference between the lives of people were reduced, even if this made no one made better off and at least some people

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<sup>1</sup> *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 160-164.

worse off. Such a move may seem pointless, and this gives rise to the “leveling down objection,” which has been much discussed of late in our academic circles.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this objection seems to be largely the older envy objection with a doctorate.

To respond to these challenges we need a clear account of the reasons for caring about equality, and inequality, as such. We also need such an account in order to respond to the claims of the better off that they are entitled to what they have. Even if it would be a very good thing if the poor were better off, or a good thing if the difference between the poor and the rich were reduced, it might still be the case that achieving these aims by redistribution would be wrong. Willie Sutton was, after all, a robber, as was Robin Hood.

Here it is essential to distinguish between two perspectives: the perspective of individuals within a given set of social institutions, which presupposes those institutions and perhaps also their legitimacy, and the perspective that one takes when one considers the justifiability of social institutions, and asks what institutions must be like in order to be morally defensible. The very idea of inequality presupposes the former perspective: what is unequal is what people *have*, the wealth or income they are entitled to according to some existing set of institutions. From this perspective, redistribution seems objectionable, since it involves taking away from people what (according to present institutions) they are entitled to.

But objections to inequality, take the second perspective, opening the question whether these institutions are justifiable, given the unequal holdings that they generate. An examination of this question cannot ignore the first perspective altogether. It needs to take into account how things will seem to people living within certain institutions, how it will be reasonable for them to feel, and what they will see themselves as having reason to

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<sup>2</sup> Cite Parfit, O’Neill and others

do. But the former perspective, and the question of whether institutions the generate inequalities are justifiable, will set the terms of our discussion.

I believe that there are reasons for objecting to inequality that meet these challenges—indeed, that there are a number of diverse reasons. The task of this book is to investigate the nature of these reasons and the ways in which they are, or are not, at base egalitarian. I describe this task as investigating the objections to inequality rather than the case for equality because this includes, potentially, a wider range of considerations. As we will see, some of the most powerful objections to inequality have to do with its consequences, and the reason for objecting to these consequences may or may not be based in the value of equality. Whether this is so is left open at this point, as a matter for investigation.

The diversity of the reasons for objecting to inequality is important, in part because it helps us to understand the differences between the kinds of inequality that we face. The inequality between the 1% and the rest of us is one thing; the inequality between the comfortably well-off and the very poor is something else; racial inequality and the various forms on inequality between men and women are yet different things. All of these forms of inequality represent serious problems, but the reasons for objecting to them are not all the same.

There is one important idea of equality that I will presuppose but not argue for. This is what might be called basic moral equality—the idea that everyone counts morally, regardless of differences such as their race, their gender, and where they live. This idea is extremely important, and has not always been accepted. The increased acceptance of the

idea of basic moral equality and the expansion of the range of people it is acknowledged to cover, has been perhaps the most important form of moral progress over the centuries.

Basic moral equality is now widely accepted, even among people who reject more substantive egalitarian claims. When Nozick, for example, writes that “Individuals have rights,” he means *all* individuals.<sup>3</sup> He thus accepts what I am calling basic moral equality. But he denies is that we owe it to people, morally speaking, to make their condition equal to that of others in wealth, income, or any other particular respect. Substantive equality of this latter kind is what I will be concerned with here. My question is: when and why is it morally objectionable that some people are worse off than others in some way? In the remainder of this chapter I will identify several kinds of reasons for objecting to inequality, many of which will be examined in more detail in later chapters.

**Status:** Caste systems and other social arrangements involving stigmatizing differences in status are leading historical examples of objectionable inequality. In these systems, members of some groups are marked as inferior, for example, by being excluded from the roles and occupations that are seen as most desirable, or being required to perform tasks that are regarded as demeaning and beneath the dignity of members of other groups. The evil involved in such arrangements has a comparative character: what is objectionable is being marked as *inferior to others* in a demeaning way.

In the historical cases of the kind I have mentioned, inequalities based on caste, race or gender are a matter of law or of entrenched social customs and attitudes. In some cases they have also involved denying what I just called basic moral equality. They may involve widely shared beliefs, for example, that members of some races do not have full moral status, perhaps even that they are “not fully human.” But such beliefs are not

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. *ix*.

essential to the evil I am concerned with. The class system in nineteenth century Britain, did not, I assume, involve the idea that members of the lower classes were not fully human, or that what happened to them did not matter morally, but only that they were not suited for, or entitled to, certain social and political roles.

Economic inequalities can also be objectionable for the reason I am now discussing, because extreme inequality in income and wealth can mean that the poor to live in a way that is reasonably seen as humiliating. As Adam Smith observed, it is a serious objection to a society if some people are so much poorer than others that they have to live and dress in such a way that they cannot go out in public without shame.<sup>4</sup> The evil here is, again, comparative—it is not merely having ragged clothes, or poor housing, but of having to live and to present oneself in a way that is so far below the standard generally accepted in the society that it marks one as inferior. As this reference to “standards generally accepted” indicates, economic inequalities have these effects only given certain prevailing attitudes about what is necessary in order for someone to be socially acceptable. So what is objectionable is a certain combination of economic inequality and social norms. I will discuss this further in Chapter 2.

**Domination:** Inequalities can also be objectionable because they give some people an unacceptable degree of control over the lives of others. If, for example, a small number of people control almost all of the wealth in a society, this can give them an unacceptable degree of control over the lives of other citizens: over where and how they can work, what they can buy, and in general what their lives will be like. More narrowly,

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<sup>4</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: Home University, 1910) pp. 351-352. Cited by Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 115.

ownership of important public media in a country gives someone control over how others in the society view themselves, and their lives, and how they understand their society.

There are two objections here, which should be distinguished. One is based in the reasons individuals have to have control over their own lives: to have valuable options open to them to choose, and to be in a good position to make these choices. The second objection is based in the reasons individuals have not to be subject to being controlled by others. As writers in the republican tradition, such as Philip Pettit, have emphasized, this objection can apply even if these others do not actually interfere with the choices of those they have control over.<sup>5</sup> It is an objection not to having diminished options available to one but to standing in a certain relation to other people, a relation of domination. This objection is more thoroughly egalitarian at base than the first one, since it is not only an objection to (economic) inequality but also based on reasons to object to certain kinds of unequal relations with others.

**Procedural Fairness:** Economic inequality can also be objectionable because it undermines the fairness of basic social institutions. Here are two familiar examples. First, when there is great inequality in family income and wealth, individual's prospects of success in a competitive market are greatly affected by the families into which they are born. This can make it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve equality of economic opportunity. This is widely recognized as a serious problem, although the case for equality of opportunity is not much discussed. I will examine that case, and its implications for inequality, in Chapter X.

Great inequalities in wealth and income can also undermine the fairness of political institutions. The wealthy will be much more able than others to influence the

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<sup>5</sup> See Pettit, *Republicanism* ...

course of political discussion, more able to gain political office themselves, and more able to influence others who hold office. This can be seen as a special case of the previous objection, since political power can be objectionable because it brings an unacceptable degree of control over others. Manipulation of the political system is one way of turning economic advantage into dominance. But undermining the fairness of the political system is morally significant in other ways, for example because it affects the legitimacy of laws and policies. I will discuss this objection in Chapter XX.

The three kinds of objections that I have just listed are all objections to economic inequality—to the differences in people's wealth or income. They make it clear how in some cases objections to these differences are not mere expressions of envy. They also provide a response to what is called the leveling down objection, an objection to the *difference* between the situation of some and than of others would be at least a *pro tanto* reason to make the better off worse off even if this did not make any one better off. The charge is that this seems irrational. But objections to economic inequality based on status or domination are not vulnerable to this charge. Eliminating stigmatizing differences in status and curbing objectionable forms of control are good reasons for reducing economic inequality even this does not make the poor any richer.

It might be said that in these cases the reduction or elimination of inequalities does make some people better off. So the leveling down objection appears to apply only if one focuses too narrowly on wealth and income, ignoring other forms of welfare. But objections to inequality based on its effects on political fairness or equality of opportunity cannot be fully understood in this way. Fair political institutions, and particularly equal economic opportunity, may lead to the poor being better off. But this is not the only

reason for insisting on them. The poor have reason to want equality of opportunity—to want to be treated fairly—even if it does not in the end lead to their being better off. (it is a further question whether the poor have reason to want to have equality of opportunity even if this means that they are less well off economically. I will discuss this question in Chapter XX.)

In the remainder of this lecture I will consider two other objections to inequality that are not, like the ones I have just listed, based on its effects but rather on the way in which it arises. One class of objections apply when an agent owes some benefit to every member of a certain group, but provides it more fully to some than to others. Suppose, for example, that a municipality is obligated to provide paved streets and sanitation to all residents. It would then be objectionable if, absent some special justification, it were to provide these services at a higher level to some than to others. For example, it would be objectionable (unjust, I would say) if it were to repave the streets more frequently in rich neighborhoods than poor ones, or more frequently in the areas where friends of the mayor, or members of a certain religious group live. I am assuming in these cases that there is no specific level of street maintenance that the city is obligated to provide. So the level of street maintenance in poor neighborhoods would not itself be open to objection if that level were being provided to everyone. What is objectionable is the difference between what is provided for some and what is provided for others to whom the same obligation is owed.

Objections to inequality of this kind presuppose an obligation on the part of some agent to provide the benefit in question to everyone in a certain group. They thus apply only where some agent has such an obligation and to inequalities that result from the

failure of that agent to fulfill this obligation to the same degree for all those to whom it is owed.. Consider, by contrast the following fact.

(1) In the U. S., life expectancy for men is 74.2 years. In China, it is 70.4 years. In Malawi, it is only 37.1 years.

This is appalling, and cries out for some action. That is to say, the last fact, about life expectancy in Malawi, is appalling and cries out for action. It is often suggested that the problem is one of inequality, sometimes called “the international life expectancy gap.” But I want to question whether this is so.

It is a very bad thing that life expectancy in Malawi is so low. But what is the relevance of the fact that it is much higher in China and in the United States? This might be relevant simply because it indicates that human beings do not have to die so young. Given presently available technology, humans can live much longer, and do so under more favorable conditions. So one reason that the low life expectancy of men in Malawi is appalling is that it is *avoidable*. But referring to this situation as “the international life expectancy gap” suggests that the great *difference* in life expectancy between the three countries itself has fundamental moral significance, and it is not clear to me that it has this significance. It seems to me that what matters is just the low life expectancy in Malawi, not the difference between it and expectancy in other countries.

The fact that people in some other countries have much greater life expectancy indicates that the low life expectancy in Malawi is avoidable. This directs our attention to the question of why it is so low. It might be due simply to unfortunate natural conditions, such as weather and soil. If, however, it is due at least in part to the fact that Malawians have been treated unjustly by others, then the concerns it raises would not be solely

humanitarian. Claims of justice would also be involved. But this would not necessarily mean that the inequality in the situation is what is objectionable about it. If I am much worse off than others because someone has stolen my bank account, the objection to my situation is not based on equality.

Now consider another set of figures.

(2) Life expectancy of black men in the 10 least healthy counties in the United States is 61 years. This is compared with a life expectancy of 76.4 years for white men in the 10 healthiest counties.

In this case, the condition of those who are worse-off is not nearly as bad as in (1), and the gap is smaller. But the situation still seems morally objectionable, and it seems to me that inequality itself is more significant in this case than in the previous one. It is still true, as in the previous case, that the situation would not be made better if some new ailment reduced the life expectancy of white men. But it nonetheless also seems to me that part of what is objectionable about the situation described is the *difference* in life expectancy. The question is why this should seem to be so, and whether this initial reaction can be supported on reflection. The answer, I believe lies in the fact that we suppose the difference in life expectancy of white men and black men within various parts of the U.S. is due to the fact that various governmental agencies that have an obligation to provide things such as public health measures and access to medical care do not fulfill this obligation as fully for black men in the poorest counties in the U.S. as for white men in richer counties.

It is tempting to say that the objection to the situation described in (1) about life expectancy in Malawi, China and the U.S., is shown not to be an objection to inequality

by the fact that this objection would not be weakened if the life expectancy in the wealthier countries were decline. If life expectancy in these countries were to decline, we should not say, “That’s too bad, but at least the international life expectancy gap has been reduced.” The same is true, however, of the difference in life expectancy within the U.S. If some new disease were to arise affecting only white men, we would not say that at least this had the effect of reducing inequality in life expectancy. But in the latter case I *do* think that there is something objectionable about the “gap” in life expectancy, not just about the fact that some people live less long than they should. If this is correct, then the leveling down test, in the form I have just used it, is not, a good way of telling when a situation is objectionable on grounds of equality.

What this shows, I believe, is that the egalitarian objection to the differences in life expectancy in the U. S. is not an objection to the fact that there *is* this difference, but rather an objection to the unequal treatment that, it is assumed, is in part responsible for this difference. So we need to look more closely at the requirement of equal treatment that seems to be violated in such cases. In particular, we need to consider exactly where ideas of equality figure in this requirement.

The idea is that if an agent has an obligation to provide some benefit, such as sanitation, street lighting, education or medical care, to people in a certain group, then there is an objectionable violation of equal treatment if the agent fulfills this obligation more fully with respect to some members of this group than with respect to others.

The idea that this is not, at base, an egalitarian requirement might be put by saying that the demand for “equal treatment” is just a requirement that an agency respond appropriately to the reasons it has for treating various people in certain ways, reasons

generated by its obligations to these people. Consider, as a comparison, Nozick's view of rights. According to Nozick, everyone has the same rights. If anyone's rights are being violated, there is an objection to this, based on the right that is violated. But there is no *further* objection, based on inequality, to a situation in which some people's rights are being violated but others' rights are not.

Insofar as this requirement of equal concern presses toward making these people actually equal in some respect this pressure toward equality comes from the fact that the obligation to provide a given increase in benefit to those who have less of this benefit is stronger than the obligation to provide the same increase in benefit to those who already are being provided with more.

Suppose for example, that an agency is responsible for providing electricity, or running water, to certain districts. If one district is currently receiving fewer hours of electricity or water per day than the other, then the agency has a stronger reason to increase the service to that district by one hour a day than to provide the same increase in service to the other district. We can leave aside for present purposes whether this is due simply to the decreasing marginal utility of these benefits to those who receive them, or whether this utility is the same (as it might be perhaps if services are currently at a low level), and the difference in strength of reasons is due to what Martin O'Neill has called the diminishing marginal moral significance of gains of this kind.<sup>6</sup> (I find it often very difficult, in thinking about particular examples, to tell which of these is the case.) In either case, however, the agency would have a stronger reason to increase service to the district that currently has less, and this difference in strength of reasons would persist

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<sup>6</sup> O'Neill, "What Should Egalitarians Believe," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36 (2008) p. 152.

until the level of service they were receiving was the same. So an agency that was providing these benefits unequally, when it could be providing them more equally, would be failing to respond to the stronger reasons that it has. And to explain this requirement of equality there would be no need to refer to a separate requirement of *equal* treatment.

I believe that this explains many (but not all) cases of inequalities that are objectionable on the particular ground I am now considering, and this seems to me to explain the appeal of prioritarianism. But while the prioritarian view seems to me correct in these cases, this does not make me a prioritarian overall, for several reasons. First, the phenomenon I have just described, and the corresponding appeal of prioritarianism, arises when we are considering the obligations of some agent who has the same obligation to provide some benefit to each member of a certain group. It is thus dependent on an obligation of this kind. Governments clearly have such obligations to their citizens, and parents have such obligations to their children, and there are no doubt many other cases of such obligations. I am doubtful, however, that we all have such obligations to people in general. Second, the requirement of equal treatment that I have been discussing is only one source of objections to inequality. So there are other egalitarian claims that do not reduce to the greater strength of reasons to help the worse off.

I want now to consider one additional way in which objections to inequality can be based on the way in which these inequalities arise. The difference between this objection and objections based on violations of equal can be seen by considering a thought experiment that Ronald Dworkin mentions at the beginning of his book, *Sovereign Virtue*. Dworkin describes “a man of some wealth” who must decide how to distribute his estate among his several children, who have led different lives and have

very different needs.<sup>7</sup> The question is whether he should distribute his wealth equally, or give more to the children who have greater need. I believe that the answer one is inclined to give to this question will depend on one's understanding of the claim that the children have on their father and his wealth. If we think of these claims as arising from the father's duty to take care of his children in certain ways, by providing good lives for them, then one may be led to think that the correct distribution of his wealth would be a division that takes into account the strengths of the reasons arising from the different needs of the children. This would be a matter of equal treatment of the kind I have been discussing. On the other hand, one may think that, as his heirs, his children have equal claim on the family wealth. It is *theirs*, one might say, in equal degree. This leads one to favor an equal distribution. What I am interested in now are claims to equality that arise in this way from equal claims to resources.

Such claims can arise in different ways. For example, if partners in a business enterprise have made the same investment of money and time, then it is plausible to say that a fair mechanism for dividing the profits should give each an equal share. One might say that a society as a whole is like this—that it is a cooperative scheme for mutual benefit, and that members of a society therefore have, at least *prima facie*, a claim to equal shares of the benefits it produces.

John Rawls's argument in *A Theory of Justice* can be seen as resting on a form of this assumption as its starting point. He argued that if the cooperating members of a society had to choose principles of distribution without knowing their places in society, they would have no reason to accept less than equal shares. But he then argued that they would have reason to move away from this "benchmark of equality," since no one could

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<sup>7</sup> *Sovereign Virtue*, pp. 12-13.

object to inequalities that did not make them worse off (assuming that other factors, such as basic liberties, were not affected.) Leaving aside for the moment the “Pareto argument” for moving away from equality in ways that make everyone better off, I am interested in the question of what justifies the choice of the “benchmark of equality” to begin with.

Consider this question first as a question about Rawls’ Original Position argument. The parties his Original Position, as he defines it, are motivated solely by the aim of doing as well as they can for themselves and those they represent. Since the Veil of Ignorance deprives them of knowledge of their particular talents or their position in society, they have no reason to believe that any particular form of unequal distribution would make them better off, hence no reason to choose a principle allowing such a distribution. But this explanation of why they would find the “benchmark of equality” the natural first starting point depends entirely on the way in which Rawls Original Position is set up—on the Veil of Ignorance and the motivation attributed to the parties. The deeper question is why a position that is set up in this way should be thought to be the appropriate way to select principles of justice.

Robert Nozick, for example, objects that this way of setting things up begs the question against “historical” conceptions of justice by ruling out claims such as those of the more talented, or of people who have produced or discovered valuable resources.<sup>8</sup> Part of Rawls’s response, I believe, is that the parties in the Original Position are (or represent) equal members of a society seen as a cooperative enterprise. It is as cooperating members of this enterprise that they have claims to the goods that their

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<sup>8</sup> *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 199-204.

cooperation produces.<sup>9</sup> This is why the shares that are to be distributed are measured in Primary Social Goods rather than in terms of benefits of some other kind. These are the goods that their cooperation produces, and to which they therefore have such a claim. Since they are *equal* cooperating members, none of them has at the outset a stronger claim on these resources than others. This is why, in the Original Position, they are symmetrically placed, leading to the initial appeal of the “benchmark of equality.”

This account of the underlying moral rationale for the benchmark of equality in Rawls’ theory rests on a controversial egalitarian claim: that cooperating members of a society have *prima facie* equal claims to the benefits that this cooperation produces. Earlier I tried to make such a claim plausible by imagining an example of the partners of a firm. But the assumptions I introduced in order to make that claim plausible—that the partners have made the same investment of time and money—are controversial, to say the least, in the case of a whole society.

My purpose here is not to argue for or against Rawls’ view. I have introduced this way of arriving at his “benchmark of equality” as an example of a kind of objection to inequality—based on an idea of equal claim to resources—that differs from those I have discussed. I mentioned earlier that the idea of equal treatment can in some cases support a prioritarian view, Rawls’ view, as I have interpreted it, does not. His Difference Principle does require a preference for improving the condition of those worst off. But this preference arises not from the idea that the claims of the worse off have greater urgency but rather from an essentially egalitarian idea that participants in cooperation have equal

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<sup>9</sup> This is only part of Rawls’ response because he also argues that insofar as they are plausible the claims of the talented, and those who are particularly productive can be explained on the basis of the principles that the parties would select. See *A Theory of Justice*, Sections 47, 48.

claims to the products of social cooperation, and that departures from equal shares of this cooperative product are defensible only if they make no one worse off.

To summarize the discussion so far: I have identified four kinds of reasons for objecting to various forms of inequality and for seeking to eliminate or reduce them:

- (1) We sometimes have reason to object to inequalities because they create humiliating differences in status.
- (2) We sometimes have reason to object to inequalities because they give those who have more unacceptable forms of power over those who have less.
- (3) We sometimes have reason to eliminate inequalities in order to preserve the equality of starting places that is required if our institutions are to be fair. Great inequality of wealth and income can, for example, undermine equality of opportunity and the fairness of political institutions.
- (4) Inequalities can be objectionable because they arise from failures of some agent to give equal treatment to those to whom it is obligated to provide some benefit.
- (5) Unequal outcomes can be objectionable because they are incompatible with the claims of participants in a cooperative enterprise to share in its benefits.

In contrast to luck egalitarian views, such as G. A. Cohen's and Richard Arneson's, which take (non-voluntary) inequality to be bad wherever it occurs<sup>10</sup>, the

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, G. A. Cohen, "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice," *Ethics*, 99.4 (1989), pp. 906-44, and Richard Arneson, "Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare", *Philosophical Studies*, 56.1 (1989), 77-93. This is an instance of what Derek Parfit calls Telic Egalitarianism." See his Lindley Lecture, "Equality or Priority?", reprinted in Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams, eds., *The Ideal of Equality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 81-125.

objections to inequality that I have listed all presuppose some form of relationship or interaction between the unequal parties. Objectionable inequalities in status presuppose some relationship that makes feelings of humiliation or diminished self-esteem reasonable. Objections based on domination apply only where inequalities involve or lead to some form of control. Objections based on procedural unfairness presuppose that the parties participate in or are subject to some institution to which requirements of fairness apply. Objections based on failures of equal treatment presuppose some agent or agency that is obligated to provide benefits of the kind in question, and the objection based on equal claim to resources that I considered presupposed some form of social cooperation.

Many of the reasons for objecting to inequality that I have discussed apply only where there are institutions with certain obligations or institutions to which certain requirements of justice apply (such as fair equality of opportunity.) This fact, and my expressed skepticism about whether the international life expectancy gap is objectionable on grounds of inequality, may lead readers to identify my position with the view defended by Thomas Nagel, that justice applies only within the boundaries of a nation state.<sup>11</sup> But my claims differ from Nagel's in important respects. First, while Nagel is addressing the question of when requirements of justice apply, I am concerned only with the narrower question of when there are important reasons for some form of substantive equality. (Justice may not always require equality.) Second, although some of the claims to equality that I identify presuppose institutions, others, such as status and domination,

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<sup>11</sup> Nagel, "The Problem of Global Justice," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 33 (2005) 113-147. For criticisms of Nagel's article see Joshua and Charles Sabel, "Extra Republicam Nulla Justitia?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 34 (2006) 147-175, and A. J. Julius, "Nagel's Atlas," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 34 (2006) 176-192.

do not, and where institutions are presupposed I do not claim that these institutions must be coextensive with or enforced by a state.

I conjecture that, taken together, these reasons may provide a full account of the role that substantive equality has in our thinking about social justice. But this is only a conjecture. I welcome suggestions that there are other reasons for favoring equality, or for objecting to inequality that I have not listed. For example, there may be other reasons for equal outcomes beyond the two I have discussed.<sup>12</sup>

There is, for example, much current discussion of the recent increase in inequality, especially in the United States, but also here in Europe. Many of the objections that I have listed may apply to this case. As I will say in my next lecture, I do not believe that recent rise of the 1%, and the .01%, is objectionable on the ground that it creates objectionable differences in status, although the difference between the very poor and the rest of society may be objectionable on this ground, as is racial inequality. The rise of the extremely rich may well be objectionable, however, on the ground that it gives the very rich an excessive degree of control over how things go in our societies.

This extreme inequality is certainly objectionable because of its effects on the fairness of our political institutions, but I would speculate that the spectacular inequality of recent decades may be as much an effect of these problems as a cause of them. Within

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<sup>12</sup> It might be argued, for example, that equality is desirable because inequality leads to social instability, or because equality contributes to economic efficiency by fostering a greater sense of solidarity and willingness to work hard for the common good. If the empirical assumptions underlying such claims are correct, then they would provide reasons of a kind for favoring greater equality. I do not discuss these arguments here because the reasons they provide seem to me too extrinsic. Another argument of this kind is that inequality causes ill health—that is, that poorer people in societies where there are significant inequalities are less healthy than people who are not on the lower end of such inequalities but are otherwise in similar circumstances. This may be a further effect of stigmatizing difference in status, which is itself an egalitarian reason for objecting to inequality, or it may be caused in other ways.

the financial sector, for example, the rise in inequality seems to be due in part to changes in government policy, such as deregulation, which were due in turn to the political influence of financial interests. And the increase in the share of productivity gains going to capital rather than to labor may reflect not only market conditions but also the pre-existing control of the wealthy over corporate policies. If this is correct, then most recent growth in inequality is an effect of objectionable forms of political and economic power resulting from pre-existing inequality, and at the same time is objectionable in part because it threatens an increase in this problem.

Another effect of extreme economic inequality on the political process is to skew government policy away from fulfilling the requirements of equal treatment that I discussed in this lecture. Programs to aid the poor, to provide universal health care and retirement benefits are cut, and state supported schools are inadequately supported. This is due to pressure both to reduce taxes on the wealthy and to reduce public expenditures. A further ground that is often mentioned for objecting to this great inequality is its effect on the possibility of achieving equality of opportunity. I will assess this objection in my third lecture.

These are serious objections to inequality based on its effects. But one gets the impression from public discussion that many people find the rising level of inequality objectionable in itself. It is an interesting question what objection they might have in mind, and whether it is one not included on my list. The objection to unequal outcomes as such that I have discussed was based on Rawls' Difference Principle. I identified its moral core as lying in the idea that members of society, as equal participants in a cooperative scheme for mutual advantage, have *prima facie* equal claim to the products

of their cooperation. I find this idea appealing, but it is, as I have tried to explain, a quite radical one.

I somehow doubt that most of the people who object to the current dramatic increase in inequality have this radical an idea in mind. Perhaps their objection to this inequality is based on its effects. Or perhaps it is not an objection to *inequality* but rather expresses a belief that the mechanisms that generate huge incomes for executives and people in the financial industry are simply illegitimate—forms of corruption and rent seeking. Insofar as their objections are genuinely egalitarian, however, I would like to know what they are, so that I can consider whether I need to add them to my list. I would appreciate your help.