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WHAT'S WRONG WITH INEQUALITY?

Avoidance of inequality is one of the important social values which have been championed for a long time. This ethical judgment has become particularly relevant in the contemporary world both (1) because of the growing visibility of persistent inequality, and (2) because of a greater understanding of the need to justify social features that conflict with our values, especially in democratic societies.

However, we have to ask: why does inequality appear socially unreasonable to us at all? Among the many answers to this question, at least three would stand out.

The first is the ethical force of the general norm of avoidance of arbitrariness. In defending or criticizing social arrangements, it is hard to make the case for giving more consideration to some people than to others, without there being some clearly discernible reason for paying particular attention to the favored people, for example those with certain special needs (such as people who are physically or mentally disabled, or having the history of being systematically discriminated in the on-going social order), in which case the special attention may not be seen as arbitrary. The avoidance of arbitrariness need not automatically translate into an ethical case against economic inequality in particular, but it can help to build the foundation for such a case. It is an invitation to reasoning, with a strong enticement to seek an appropriate way of giving concreteness to avoiding arbitrary inequality. For example, in demanding gender equity, the argument can start with there being no particular reason for men being given certain privileges that are denied to women.

The second route to answering the question (what's wrong with inequality?) relates to the empirical evidence that living in unequal societies with some people being relatively much worse off – economically and socially - than others tends to produce deprivations that are absolute. For example, Michael Marmot's famous studies of the "Whitehall gradient" established that in the community of British civil servants (who work in the Whitehall), the underdogs who are not only less privileged than others but are also ordered around a great deal by their "bosses" tend typically to have worse health conditions (than people higher up the ladder), and have significantly lower life expectancy (often related to excessive drinking and smoking to get over the frustration generated by their subjugated and inferior life style). Other studies, for example by Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, have given extensive evidence of the deprivation of health, longevity and general well-being caused by living under very unequal conditions. This can be seen as absolute deprivation generated by relative inequality.

The third approach is primarily mathematical. If we seek all-round advancement of people's lives, even without any direct interest in reducing inequality, the need for inequality reduction may follow as a logical consequence of the absolutist pursuit. For example, in a country without arrangements for medical facilities for all, a general advancement of medical facilities cannot but pay attention to removing the disadvantage of the deprived – and that would tend to have the consequence of reducing inequality. A programme of expanding medical care in general cannot escape helping those who are currently left out. Even though there are many policy issues in which the advancement of aggregate advantages conflicts with achieving a reduction of inequality of advantages, there is also a fundamental mathematical complementarity between the two objectives.