

## When Does Equality Matter?<sup>1</sup>

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The first theme of this paper is that we have many different reasons for being opposed to inequality. Only some of these reasons are *egalitarian*—that is to say, reasons for being concerned with inequality itself. And even those reasons that are egalitarian in this sense are diverse in their sources: they have different bases and demand different things. My aim in pointing out that many of our reasons for opposing inequality are not intrinsically egalitarian is not to debunk the idea of equality but, rather, to defend egalitarian goals more effectively. If we recognize the diversity of reasons for opposing inequality, we will be in a better position to understand controversies about equality and to decide what to think about them. In particular, as I will suggest in an appendix to the paper, we will be in a better position to understand and respond to the often heard claim that equality is problematic because it conflicts with liberty. Finally, in the last part of the paper, I will argue that in some cases in which equality seems to be controversial the disagreement is not really about the value or importance of equality but rather about some other question, about the proper responsibility of governments.

I will begin by considering some examples, intended to raise questions about when equality matters. Here is a shocking fact:

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally written for presentation at a conference on equality at the John F. Kennedy School of Government in April 2004. Subsequent versions were given in Berlin at the *Kulturforum der Sozialdemokratie*, at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, as the Wei-Lun Lecture, and at Nanjing Normal University, and at a faculty discussion sponsored by the Harvard Program in Justice, Welfare, and Economics. I am grateful to all of these audiences for helpful comments and discussion. I am also grateful to Charles Beitz and Tommie Shelby for helpful comments and suggestions.

(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. What I want to discuss, however, is the relevance of the three facts to each other. It is clearly bad 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. Under more favorable conditions they live much longer; so one reason that the low life expectancy of men in Malawi is appalling is that it is *avoidable*. But figures like these are sometimes cited as an example of what is called “the international life expectancy gap.” This phrase suggests that the great *difference* in life expectancy between the three countries itself has fundamental moral significance. But 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.

Insofar as the objection to the situation described in (1) were egalitarian, one would expect this objection to be weakened if the life expectancy in the wealthier countries were to fall. But this does not seem to me to be the case. If this were to happen, we should not say, “That’s too bad, but at least the international life expectancy gap has been reduced.” This suggests that the objection in this case is not, at base, egalitarian.

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 nonetheless the case. A number of possible factors occur to on,

such as: pricing policies by pharmaceutical companies, and laws protecting “intellectual property” that make needed drugs unavailable in poor countries; failure of these companies to develop drugs for diseases that most affect these countries; trade policies and agricultural subsidies in developed countries that keep countries like Malawi poor. These factors seem objectionable, and insofar as they are they add to further support to one’s sense that something should be done about the situation described in (1). (That is, they add to the already powerful sense that this is so simply because of the abysmal plight of the Malwians.) These factors have to do with such things as unfair procedures, and with an emphasis on profits to the exclusion of serving acute needs. But I will return later to the question of whether the objections to some of these factors may be egalitarian.

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. The question is why this should seem to be so and whether this initial reaction can be supported on reflection.

Consider some other examples:

- (3) At a recent conference on equality in Israel, I was told that the level of basic services such as paved streets, sanitation, and access to water were much

higher in Jewish Israeli villages than in otherwise comparable villages occupied by Israeli Arabs (that is to say, Israeli citizens of Arab decent.)

(4) Students in public grade schools in some school districts in Massachusetts, where I live, receive a much better education than students in other districts in the same state, and much better than students in many districts in Mississippi, a poorer state in the southern U.S.

(5) It is also true, presumably, that all of these students receive much better education than students in rural Malawi.

(6) The distribution of income in the United States is highly unequal, and this inequality has grown significantly in recent years. As Paul Krugman has written, "Over the past 30 years most people have seen only modest salary increases: the average annual salary in America, expressed in 1998 dollars (that is, adjusted for inflation), rose from \$32,522 in 1970 to \$35,864 in 1999. That's about a 10 percent increase over 29 years -- progress, but not much. Over the same period, however, according to Fortune magazine, the average real annual compensation of the top 100 C.E.O.'s went from \$1.3 million -- 39 times the pay of an average worker -- to \$37.5 million, more than 1,000 times the pay of ordinary workers."<sup>2</sup>

What I am interested in is the role that the idea of equality plays in explaining what is objectionable about these facts. It seems to me, for example, that it plays a greater role in (2) than in (1) and a greater role in (3) and (4) than in (5). I want to consider whether this is so, and if so why.

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<sup>2</sup> New York Times Magazine, October 20, 2003

As I have said, I believe that our concern in case (1), the case of global inequality, is and properly should be mainly with the fact that life expectancy in Malawi is so low, and not with the “gap” between life expectancy there and in developed countries. Concern of the sort that properly moves us in this case can provide morally important reason for wanting to reduce inequality. But equality is in these cases of only instrumental importance. If, for example, life in Malawi would be greatly improved by a tax that would transfer a small amount of income from people in developed countries to people in Malawi, there would be a humanitarian reason for instituting such a tax. This would also have the effect of reducing the difference in life expectancy between the two regions. But this reduction in inequality, in itself, would be merely side effect, not a reason for adopting the tax. The reason would be the purely humanitarian one of improving the lives of the poor.

By calling this a humanitarian reason, I do not mean to imply that it is less morally compelling than other reasons. There is a strong moral demand to alleviate conditions like those in Malawi. My only point is that this reason does not seem to be based on a moral requirement of equality. Genuinely egalitarian objections to inequality are *comparative*. They are concerned with the relation between the levels of benefit that individuals enjoy. They are also *unspecific* in not being concerned with the absolute levels of these benefits. I will take these two features—being comparative and unspecific as to level—as features that any genuinely egalitarian reasons must have.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Amartya Sen has observed that every theory of justice takes individuals to be equal in some respect. In his famous Tanner Lecture, “Equality of What?” he says that even Robert Nozick’s entitlement theory holds that individuals are equal in having the same rights. But Nozick’s view does not meet either of the minimum conditions of egalitarianism that I have just defined. Nozick would object to a situation in which some people’s rights are respected while the rights of others are not. But his objection would be

The comparative and unspecific character of egalitarian claims gives rise to familiar objections. It is easy to understand why individuals should be concerned with absolute levels of well being that they are able to attain, and why they should want to achieve a higher levels. But why, it is asked, should they be so concerned with what others have, and with the comparison between their lives and those of others. This emphasis on comparative benefits, rather than on absolute levels, leaves egalitarianism open to the charge that it is based on envy, and to the charge that it is irrationally concerned with preserving “patterns” of distribution. Envy is a perfectly understandable human emotion, to which we are all subject to some degree. But if the demands for equality are based on envy, why should they have any moral weight? I believe that these objections can be answered. In order to answer them we need to focus on cases in which there are reasons for objecting to inequality that are not only understandable but also rational and morally significant. I will discuss four such reasons.<sup>4</sup> I will introduce them briefly now and then return to examine some of them in more detail.

**Status:** The leading historical examples of objectionable inequality are caste systems and other social arrangements involving stigmatizing differences in status. In these systems, members of some groups are marked as inferior by, for example, being excluded from roles and occupations that are seen as most desirable, or required to

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simply to the fact that some rights are violated, not to the difference between the two. His objection would thus be non-comparative and specific as to level. My reaction to the “international life expectancy gap” is, at least initially, of this same form, and hence not egalitarian.

<sup>4</sup> I first presented these reasons in my Lindley Lecture, “The Diversity of Objections to Inequality,” reprinted in my collection of essays, *The Difficulty of Tolerance* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The fourth reason that I present here—“Equal Benefits,”—differs in important respects from the corresponding reason in my earlier

perform tasks that are regarded as demeaning and beneath the dignity of members of other groups. The evil involved in such arrangements is a comparative one. It is not the tasks themselves that are demeaning—they may be necessary tasks that someone has to perform in any society. What is objectionable is being marked as inferior to others in a demeaning way. The remedy is to abolish the social system that defines and upholds these distinctions between superior and inferior.

In the historical cases I am referring to, inequalities based on caste, race or gender are a matter of law or of entrenched social attitudes. But purely economic inequalities can be objectionable for the reason I am here discussing. One consequence of extreme inequality in income and wealth can be that it forces the poor to live in a way that is reasonably seen as humiliating. Here again, the evil is comparative—it is not merely an objection to 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, and as someone that others would not want to associate with. This provides a reason not only to improve the lot of the poor, but also, even if their lot is, in absolute terms, not so bad, to object to the creation of a much higher standard of living for others. This may not, in some cases be a sufficient reason to deny others these benefits, but it is a recognizable cost that these benefits bring, and one that cannot be put down to envy.

**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

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article. I have modified it in response to criticisms made by Paul Weithman, in a review forthcoming in *Ethics*. I am grateful to Weithman for his helpful comments.

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, ownership of the 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. Unequal economic power may also put some in a position to enforce unfair terms of trade on others, who have fewer options. Whether the terms of trade that would be fair are *egalitarian* or not, insofar as they are ones that people should not have to accept, this gives reason of the kind I am now discussing to object to the inequality that gives others the power to enforce these terms. This may apply to the case of Malawi, and thus explain why that may seem to be a case in which considerations of inequality play a significant role, even if what we are objecting to, in objecting to the low life expectancy of Malawians, is not in the first instance the difference between life expectancy there and elsewhere.

**Procedural Fairness:** Inequalities can be objectionable because they undermine 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 makes it difficult, if not impossible to achieve equality of economic opportunity. Second, great inequalities in wealth and income undermine the fairness of political institutions. The wealthy will be much more able than others to gain political office themselves, and much more able to influence others who hold office, who must be dependent on them for contributions. Thus, one reason to want to reduce economic inequality is that this is necessary to preserve the fairness of both economic and political institutions.



**Equal Outcomes:** This brings us to the question of whether there are circumstances in which justice requires not just equal starting places but equality of outcomes. For example, if members of a group have equal claims to a certain benefit, then a distributive procedure that is supposed to be responsive to these claims will be fair only if it yields equal shares. This might be true in the case of partners who have made the same investment of money and time in a business enterprise. If they have done this then it seems 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 initially, a claim to equal shares of the benefits it produces. But the premises of this argument—corresponding to the assumptions, in the case of the partnership, that the partners have made the same investment of time and money—are controversial in the case of a whole society.

John Rawls's argument in *A Theory of Justice* took 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 move away from this "bench mark of equality," since no one could object to inequalities that did not make them worse off (assuming that other factors, such as basic liberties were not affected.) I will not pursue this particular egalitarian idea here, since it is well known.

What I am interested in is whether there are other grounds for holding that fair procedures must yield equal outcomes. Rawls's benchmark of equality arises from an

idea of the equal claims that people have as contributors to a cooperative enterprise.<sup>5</sup>

Possibly there are other grounds for equality that arise from claims of contributors in some other way that Rawls's does (for example, by appeal to an idea of desert.)

The other claim to equal outputs that I will discuss here, however, appeals more to the claims of beneficiaries. The idea might be put as follows: If each member of a group has the same claim to be provided with a certain kind of benefit, then, absent special justification, they should receive this benefit to the same degree. Put in this way, however, the claim seems clearly false. Every member of the group of people who are in extreme need, and whom I could help, may have a claim on me for that help. But it does not follow that I must benefit them all equally, or even that I need a strong reason to benefit some more than others. If I help some of them this does not give the others a new claim on me—a claim to be treated equally—over and above the claim to aid that their need already gave rise to. To make the thesis I have stated defensible, we need to add something about the stringency of the claims in question. So consider the following:

**Equal Benefit:** If each member of a group has the same claim that some individual or institutional agent, provide it with a certain benefit, and if that agent is obligated to respond to all of these claims, then that agent must, absent special justification, provide each member of the group with the same level of benefit.

This narrows the range of applicability of the claim, and seems to rule out counter examples like the one just mentioned. Moreover, it seems to explain some clear cases. It seems to capture, for example, what is objectionable in the example of unequal provision

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<sup>5</sup> The fact that the claim to equal shares that Rawls considers arises from the claims of contributors to a cooperative enterprise may help to explain why he takes it to be a claim to equal resources (rather than, welfare, for example): as contributors what they have a claim to is a share of what their cooperative activity produces.

of services to Israeli villages. The inequality in provision of resources seems so clearly objectionable because we assume that the government is obligated to supply services to all of these villages, and that they all have the same claim to these services. In order to reach this conclusion we do not need to assume that the claims of the villages are comparative (claims to equal services) or that they are claims to specific levels of benefit. Nor is the conclusion that any specific level of benefit needs to be provided. Many different levels of public services (street paving, water and other amenities) might satisfy the demand for equal treatment. The conclusion is thus egalitarian in the sense I defined above: it is comparative, and it is unspecific as to level.

This principle also provides additional support to some of the examples about education that I mentioned at the outset. Insofar as state governments, in the U.S., are obligated to provide education throughout the state, and since the claims of various communities to state aid are the same, the state government must respond to these claims with equal benefit. It is difficult to get the same argument started in regard to differences in education internationally, because it is difficult to identify any agent that is under the relevant obligation to provide education.

With regard to health, it may seem that things are different: there are international bodies, such as the World Health Organization whose mission it is to oversee, and perhaps to insure the provision of the conditions required for good health throughout the world. Given the existence of such organizations, it may seem to follow that the international life expectancy gap is objectionable *on egalitarian grounds*, namely as a violation of my Equal Benefit requirement.<sup>6</sup> But this will be so only if the existence of this gap is due to a failure of the WHO and similar institutions to fulfill their obligations.

More specifically, this will be an egalitarian objection only if the gap reflects the fact that these organizations fulfill their obligations to the developed countries more fully than their obligations to poor and developing countries. Similarly, the unequal education available to children in various parts of the United States (or parts of some particular state) is a violation of Equal Benefit only if and because it reflects differential treatment by the relevant authorities.

These examples bring out the two salient features of the argument for equal benefit that I am describing. (1) This argument depends on the existence of an institutional agent against which various individuals or groups have claims to be provided with certain benefits. (2) It depends on the stringency of those claims.

On the view I have been suggesting, the unification of Germany gave rise to two kinds of claims for equality that did not exist before. The first is a claim of equality of opportunity. When the country was divided, people from one half were not in competition for jobs in the other. But because the country as a whole is now a single labor market, governed by a single set of institutions which must meet the demands of justice, the requirement of equality of opportunity now applies across the country. So education has to be provided that gives students who have the same talent and motivation the same chances of developing talents that qualify for economic reward, whichever part of the country they are born into.

The second is a claim to equal benefit. Because one government is now responsible for providing public services to the whole territory, it is now an objectionable inequality if the government provides greater support of this kind in one zone than in the other. Of course, this leaves open the question of what *level* of services is required. For

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<sup>6</sup> This was suggested to me by Normal Daniels.

example, government must provide unemployment compensation to protect those who lose their jobs as the result of market changes or changes in technology. But how long must government provide this compensation? And must they provide it for workers who could find work by changing their trade, or by moving to another area? I believe that, like questions about street paving, these are not properly seen as questions of equality. Rather, they are prior questions about the obligations of government, on which claims to equality of benefit depend. So, for example, a negative answer to the last two questions might be seen as ungenerous, but it should not be seen as a retreat from equality.

The first of these claims might be disputed, on the grounds that the separation of the two Germanys was itself unjust (a violation of the right to freedom of movement), and one cannot bring a system into conformity with the fair equality of opportunity simply by unjustly restricting the range of people who are able to compete for positions to which special advantages are attached. So fair equality of opportunity already applied (and was violated) before unification.

I do not find this objection compelling, for a reason that casts light on the relation between the two claims just considered (and on the nature of the requirement of fair equality of opportunity.) Suppose that before 1989 there had been freedom of movement between East and West Germany, but that the education offered in the two regions was quite different. One can suppose either that it was on the whole much better in one region than in the other or that the quality of training available in various fields was quite different—perhaps training in law and economics was much better in West Germany but training in engineering and technology better in the East. In either case, equally talented individuals born in different sides of the divide would have different prospects of success

in employment. It does not seem to me that this would have constituted an injustice (in particular, not a violation of fair equality of opportunity.) But the same situation would be unjust after unification. (given plausible assumptions about the state's obligation to provide education, to which the principle of equal benefit would apply.)

If this is correct, then the first claim I made above about the consequences of unification still holds. But it holds in a way that raises a question about the distinction between the two claims. The situation in my imaginary divided Germany was not unjust because neither of the two countries was obligated to provide its citizens with a certain level of training just because it was offered by the other (not were they required by justice to offer remedial education to job applicants from the other country.) This suggests to me that the demands of fair equality of opportunity that go beyond "careers open to talents" may be based in the idea that a government is obligated to provide citizens with the opportunity to develop talents necessary to compete for the positions of advantage that it is offering and therefore *via the idea of equal benefit* that it is required to offer this benefit equally to all.

Many of the reasons for objecting to inequality that I have discussed (at least those in my fourth and fifth categories) apply only where there are institutions with certain obligations (as under Equal Benefit) 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 (rather than only on other grounds), may lead readers identify my position with the view defended by Thomas Nagel, that justice applies only within the

boundaries of a nation state.<sup>7</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, I do not claim that these institutions must be coextensive with or enforced by a state.

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

- (1) We often have reason to reduce inequalities for essentially humanitarian reasons, because taking from those who have more is the only, or the best, way to alleviate the hardships of those who have less.
- (2) We sometimes have reason to eliminate inequalities because they create humiliating differences in status.
- (3) We sometimes have reason to eliminate inequalities in order to prevent those who have more from exercising unacceptable forms of power over those who have less.
- (4) 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.

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<sup>7</sup> Nagel, "The Problem of Global Justice," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 33 (2005) 113-147. For criticisms of Nagel's article see Joshua Cohen 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.

- (5) In at least some cases, if an agency is obligated to deliver some good to various beneficiaries, it must, absent special justification, deliver it in equal measure to all of them.

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 I am open to argument that there are other reasons for favoring equality, or for objecting to inequality, that I have not listed. What I want to do now is to examine some of these objections to inequality a little further and then to consider what light the diversity of these egalitarian ideas sheds on some particular questions of equality.

Some of these reasons for objecting to inequality are essentially forward-looking: they appeal to the *consequences* of disparities in levels of benefits.<sup>8</sup> This is most obvious in what might be called competition cases. When people are in competition for certain goods, the fairness of that competition, and its likely outcomes, will depend heavily on the relative positions from which the competitors begin. The third reason I cited for objecting to inequalities (avoiding unacceptable concentrations of power) and the fourth reason (preserving fair equality of opportunity) were of this kind.

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<sup>8</sup> There are, potentially, many other reasons of this kind. 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, for which there seems to be growing evidence, is that inequality causes ill health—that is, that people of lower socio-economic standing 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 strikes me as less extrinsic because what it seems to call our attention to is the effect of another evil, namely stigmatizing difference in status, which is itself an egalitarian reason for objecting to inequality. What this claim does is to add to the weight of this already significant factor.



My reactions to some of the examples I cited at the beginning of my talk can be explained on these forward-looking grounds. For example, I said that differences in the quality of education within a given state in the U. S., or within the U.S. as a whole seemed more objectionable on egalitarian grounds than differences between the quality of education in the U.S. and in Malawi. This may reflect the assumption (contestable, perhaps) that students within a given state or even within the same country are in competition for the same jobs. (Or, at least, that they ought to be able to compete fairly for these jobs.) But there is no similar competition between students in the U.S. and students in Malawi. It might be claimed that in an era of globalization this assumption may cease to be true. I think this is probably an exaggeration at present. But if it is true, then I am happy to accept the consequence. My point is just that this particular argument for preserving equal starting places, and hence for objecting to differences, holds only where there is competition of this kind.

The importance of eliminating stigmatizing differences in status also depends on a kind of proximity. Where people reasonably compare their lives and conditions with each other, differences in level can lead to reasonable feelings of loss of esteem. But this is reasonable only where there is contact of the relevant sort between the different groups. (Again, it might be claimed that given the globalization of media and entertainment in today's world, we are all neighbors in this respect and can reasonably measure our lives by each other's. I doubt that this is so, but my task here is not to contest the point.)

The reasons I have listed for objecting to inequality share this forward-looking character. But they differ in the degree to which they are, at base, *egalitarian* objections. The aim of avoiding stigmatizing differences in status appeals to an ideal of fraternity

that is fundamentally egalitarian, and has been central to the egalitarian tradition. Objections to concentration of power may sound less purely egalitarian (freedom from domination is not the same thing as equal status), but the idea of domination by others as the main evil of unequal societies is familiar in the republican strain of egalitarian thought. Both of these ideas (the evil of stigmatization and the importance of avoiding domination) are emphasized by Rousseau, for example.

The idea of equality of opportunity is less purely egalitarian, since it presupposes the legitimacy of the unequal positions or rewards that people are competing for. It presupposes that these inequalities are justified, because it is this justification that provides the basis for distinguishing selection according to merit from bias or favoritism. If awarding special benefits according to merit were no better than favoritism then equality of opportunity would lose its point. But because equality of opportunity is compatible in this way with unequal rewards, and appears to say nothing about how these rewards must be limited, it has something of a bad name among many egalitarians, who say that it is not really an egalitarian doctrine at all, or that it is a myth, promulgated in order to make unacceptable inequalities seem acceptable. No doubt the idea of equality of opportunity has been used in this way. But if it is taken seriously this bad reputation is undeserved. So I want to explore the question further.

There are difficult questions here both about how equality of opportunity should be understood and how it is to be justified. I will begin with the question of definition. First, equality of opportunity as I understand it is not a justification for inequalities but a necessary condition that must be satisfied if inequalities that are justified on other grounds are to be acceptable.

Second, as Brian Barry has pointed out, if having the opportunity for X means being able to take some course of action that will lead to one's getting X then what is commonly called "equality of opportunity" is not really such.<sup>9</sup> If positions and rewards are handed out on the basis of abilities that not everyone has or could develop, then some people have no opportunity to receive them. So if equality of opportunity means anything it must be understood in some other way. I will take it as requiring that certain factors not be determinants of who receives advantageous positions.

The simplest idea of equality of opportunity applies to the process of selection among candidates who present themselves. It says that preference must not be given to candidates on the basis of factors that are irrelevant to their qualification for the position in question (irrelevant to their ability to perform the job, or in the case of education, to make best use of the kind of learning that is offered.) This rules out discrimination on racial or other grounds as well as nepotism and other kinds of favoritism.

But equality of opportunity requires more than this. It applies not only to selection among candidates but also to the conditions that determine who can acquire the qualifications to be a candidate. Rawls calls this stronger requirement "fair equality of opportunity" and he states it as follows:

those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system<sup>10</sup>

Put in the terms I have just used, what this requirement rules out is a system in which talented individuals born into poorer families lack access to the resources required in

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<sup>9</sup> *Why Social Justice Matters* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2005), pp. 37-38.

<sup>10</sup> *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971). P. 73.

order to develop their talents and thus qualify for positions of special advantage, even if selection for these positions is administered without bias or favoritism. (The motivational condition “and have similar willingness to use them” raises further questions to which I will return.)

The requirement of fair equality of opportunity was introduced by Rawls with little argument, and placed in his theory as a “rider” on the Difference Principle, for which much more argument was offered. Perhaps Rawls did not think it necessary to offer an extended argument for this rider because it seemed uncontroversial. But it is in fact a very demanding ideal.

The idea of equality of opportunity does enjoy wide acceptance. It is recognized, or at least is paid lip service, even by many who would not be considered egalitarians. When *A Theory of Justice* first appeared, for example, the book was attacked from the right on the ground that the Difference Principle went beyond equality of opportunity (which these critics favored) and required equality of result (which they firmly opposed.) The book was also attacked from the left, as insufficiently egalitarian, in part because it took no stand on the question of ownership of the means of production, but also because the Difference Principle seemed to permit significant inequalities, as long as the benefits of these “trickled down,” and as long as equality of opportunity was maintained.

Thus both sides focused their criticism on the Difference Principle (the consequences of which they understood differently), while largely ignoring the requirement of equality of opportunity (which the right favored, and the left scorned.) I believe that both were mistaken. In one respect the right was closer to being correct: the Difference Principle would require a level of economic equality much greater than that of

most, and perhaps any, of the industrialized countries we are familiar with. But I believe that both right and left were mistaken about the idea of equality of opportunity. In the form of Rawls's idea of fair equality of opportunity, this is an extremely demanding standard, even considered apart from any independent restriction on the degree of inequality in the rewards for which people compete.

As long as there is significant economic inequality between families (anything like the degree of inequality that prevails in the societies we are familiar with), this is almost certain to affect the early training that children receive, their success in school, and their relative ability to compete for the positions to which special rewards are attached. As Rawls says, it is difficult to see how fair equality of opportunity could be achieved in a society in which rewards were determined solely by the market, at least "as long as some form of the family exists."<sup>11</sup>

So "equality of opportunity" properly understood, serves as an egalitarian Trojan horse: achieving fair equality of opportunity requires, if not "equality of outcomes" then at least something much closer to it than we have seen in most of the societies with which we are familiar. (I will return to the question of what we should make of this.)

This raises the question of how this requirement is to be justified. I am going to assume for purposes of this discussion that the positions that are in question (whether they are places in educational institutions or jobs to which special powers and prerogatives are attached) are specially desirable simply because of the opportunities they present for developing and exercising particular talents and abilities, quite independent of any special monetary rewards. I think that the justifications I will consider could

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<sup>11</sup> *A Theory of Justice* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edn.) p. 64.

generalize to cover the requirement of equal opportunity for positions which carry special monetary rewards *should there be independent justification for these*.

Consider first the more limited idea of equal opportunity, which rules out favoritism or discrimination in the selection process. One natural justification for this requirement derives from the benefits which provide the justification for the positions of advantage that are in question. These might simply be benefits to individuals, such as the benefit of having a certain kind of education, or the benefits to society of having special positions occupied by individuals with specialized training and ability. Looking at this from the point of view, so to speak, of those who are paying for these advantages, it is reasonable to demand that they be distributed in a way that is designed to provide the benefits in question, rather than given to friends and relatives of those in power, or to members of some favored group. This objection applies to pure cronyism as well as to discrimination on racial or other lines. Actual discrimination is also open to a further objection of the sort I mentioned under the heading of “status”: it is part of a system in which some are stigmatized as inferior, in particular as not possible candidates for positions requiring talent and expertise, and carrying special status or authority. But the former objection has force on its own.

The question I want to turn to is how this, or some other rationale, might be applied to the stronger requirement of fair equality of opportunity, which requires not only unbiased selection among candidates but also the provision of the resources necessary for talented individuals to become good candidates. One might try to extend the “efficiency” or “rational relation” argument that I have just described to apply also to this case. But, as is well-known, this seems insufficient. Fair equality of opportunity is

required whether or not it is cost-effective. It seems to flow not from a “top down” justification appealing to the goals of the institution, but rather from a “bottom up” idea of what individuals can reasonably claim.

How might these claims be understood? We might begin from the benefits to individuals of being able to develop their talents and to exercise these talents in positions of the kind in question. If these benefits are ones that government is obligated to provide, then there would be a case for claiming, along the lines I discuss under “equal benefit” for the claim that it should provide these benefits equally to all who can make use of them—that is to say, all who have the relevant talents, regardless of social position. The parallel would be with the argument that medical care should be provided for all who qualify for (that is to say, need) it.

This argument seems to work better for the case of education than for the positions for which education is a qualification. But there is a further problem which the comparison with medical care brings out. The benefit required by fair equality of opportunity has an essentially comparative aspect that is lacking in the case of medical care (or other benefits to which my “equal benefit” rationale applies.) What is required is a level of training that will allow the talented but poor to compete effectively with wealthier candidates, so that the choice between them will depend on their abilities (and their willingness to develop and use them) rather than on their economic circumstances. By contrast, an argument from “equal benefit” does not, in itself, require a level of medical care equal to what the rich can provide for themselves privately. It is a separate question what that level should be.

What, then, is the basis for the claim to *comparative* benefit that the requirement of fair equality of opportunity involves? I am not certain what the answer to this question is, but here is a conjecture. First, there is a good argument, on efficiency grounds, for having these benefits assigned by a kind of competition. But, given that this is so, and that the rich can give themselves and their children a leg up in this competition, the requirement of equal benefit will not be achieved if starting points in the competition are not equalized—rather, these benefits will be the prerogative of the already rich. By contrast, the rich (barring certain forms of psychiatric illness) are not likely to give themselves a head start in the competition for medical care by making themselves sicker.

Let me turn now to the question of motivation that I mentioned above in passing. There is an ambiguity here in Rawls's formulation of the idea of equality of fair opportunity. According to the formulation that I gave above, what is required is that "those who are at the same level of talent and ability, *and have the same willingness to use them*, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system..." (my emphasis) But what Rawls goes on to say (the passage about "willingness to make an effort" is representative) suggests that equality of fair opportunity is not achieved if, do to unfortunate family circumstances, many people develop psychologically in such a way that they "fail to make an effort" and therefore fail to qualify for advantages for which they have the talent to qualify.

This seems correct to me, most clearly so in cases of the kind that Rawls appears to have in mind, in which the "unfortunate" circumstances in question consist of poverty and its consequences. But things are less clear, and more difficult, in cases in which the factors at work are not economic, or not purely economic, but cultural. What people are



likely to develop the “willingness to make an effort” for depends on what they see as a real possibility for them and on what they come to value. And this will be different for people growing up in different communities. Children growing up in communities as different as the Old Order Amish and the Roma may typically develop a “willingness to make an effort” for some purposes, but not for accomplishments of the kind that society rewards most highly because, due to the outlook they are led to form in their community, they do not value these accomplishments, or do not see these pursuits as real possibilities for them. Should we say that equality of opportunity is not attained if people born into such communities do not have as good a chance to qualify for social advantages as equally talented members of other communities? An unequivocally negative answer seems to require us to overlook some cases of objectionable inequality. But an unequivocal positive answer seems to require objectionable intervention into family and community life in order for equality of opportunity to be achieved.<sup>12</sup>

It may be helpful here to bear in mind the rationale for the qualification “and have equal willingness to use them.” The question is this: when does a person’s failure to make the choices he or she could have made to acquire the relevant skills for a position undermine his or her objection when that position is given to someone else? An answer is complicated by the fact that, as Barry notes, acquiring the skills to qualify for a position

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<sup>12</sup> These cases also raise a possibility that I mentioned above and will only note in passing. This is that what is objectionable in some such cases may be the society’s system of rewards. If a society not only allows certain forms of accomplishment but also makes financial and status reward depend very greatly on how well people do in these pursuits, and if these pursuits are not in fact valuable, or not as valuable (or as much more valuable than other forms of accomplishment) as the society claims, then perhaps we should see this social emphasis as itself the source of objectionable inequality.

may require different degrees of sacrifice from different individuals.<sup>13</sup> I believe that this question should be answered by appeal to what I call the value of choice.<sup>14</sup> A person's failure to make a choice undermines his claim to the benefits that would have flowed from it only if the conditions in which he was given that choice (including such things as the available information, and incentives such as the attractiveness of various alternatives) were "good enough"—that is, as good as social institutions, or other actors, could be required to supply.

I turn now briefly to the question of the fairness of political institutions. Rawls says that in a just society the "fair value of political liberties" should be preserved. He formulates this requirement in terms that are strikingly similar to the idea of fair equality of opportunity in the economic realm. What is required, he says, is that "citizens similarly gifted and motivated have roughly an equal chance of influencing the government's policy and of attaining positions of authority irrespective of their economic and social class."<sup>15</sup> Our experience in the United States clearly indicates that, like fair equality of economic opportunity, this requirement is very difficult if not impossible to fulfill as long as income and wealth are largely determined by the market, and the price of kind of access to public media that is necessary in order to mount an effective political campaign is also determined by the market.

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<sup>13</sup> *Why Social Justice Matters*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>14</sup> I try to explain and defend this account of responsibility in "The Significance of Choice," In Sterling M. McMurrin, ed., *Tanner Lectures of Human Values Volume VIII* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1988), and in Chapter 6 of *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 358. I have misgivings about the adequacy of this formula as an account of political equality, but I will nonetheless take it as the basis for discussion, since I do not think that my misgivings will be relevant to the points discussed below (and because I do not have a better account to substitute for it!)

The conclusion that procedural fairness (in the economic or the political realm) requires substantive equality can be applied in two different directions. On the one hand, we can ask what background conditions are necessary in order for the requirements of procedural equality to be fulfilled. Arguing in this way, we can reach the conclusion, with Rawls, that political fairness and equality of opportunity are very difficult if not impossible to achieve unless inequality in income and wealth is curtailed. Procedural fairness requires something much closer to equality of outcome than anything we are familiar with.

This conclusion seems quite robust in philosophical theory, where the question we are concerned with is what a just society would have to be like. It is much less clear, however, what this comes to in practice, that is to say in actual politics. On the one hand, it seems as if it should be a powerful conclusion. As I have said, procedural fairness (at least in the form of equality of opportunity) is much more widely accepted as a goal than is equality of outcomes, so it would seem that an argument for equality that relies only on this widely accepted premise might have considerable political force. But this argument does not seem to have much political force. Perhaps this partly because it is not widely understood. And, even if it were accepted, there remains the problem of implementation: it is one thing to conclude that justice requires greater equality and quite another to identify, and to accept, measures that will achieve this equality in politically acceptable ways.

Frustration on this front may lead us to apply the idea of procedural fairness in a second way. This is the more moderate strategy of asking what steps we can take to at least come closer to realizing political fairness and equality of opportunity, given that

significant levels of inequality in wealth and income exist and are not going to go away. Our experience in the United States with campaign finance legislation suggests a rather discouraging response to this question. It is very difficult to prevent high levels of economic inequality from producing objectionable inequality in political influence. This is not merely a political problem: leaving aside the difficulties of getting the needed reforms enacted, we do not seem to have found a solution to the problem even in principle. We do not have a good idea of what a just system of campaign finance would look like. And the problem seems to be getting worse rather than better.

When we turn to equality of opportunity in the economic realm, the picture may be slightly less discouraging, at least at the level of theory. Good public schools, including programs for preschool children from disadvantaged homes, and prevention of the kind of poverty that produces destructive home environments, could go some way toward achieving a meaningful degree of equality of opportunity, even if not the full equality of prospects that Rawls states. These steps may be difficult to achieve in practice, but at least the steps are clear.

One reason why progress might be easier to conceive of in this case than in the case of political fairness is that what is required is to improve equality of economic opportunity is mainly to improve the lot of the poor and to provide good schools and public services. It is not clear, however, whether this is so in the case of political fairness. It may be that, in order to achieve political fairness, it is important not only to improve matters for the poor by providing better schools and better access to means of political expression, but also to constrain the ability of the rich to convert their wealth into dominance of the public political discussion. This is much more difficult to do, especially

in a way that is compatible with robust rights of freedom of expression. I am told that there is some empirical literature suggesting that in one respect things are not as bad as this sounds, because what is most important in promoting political participation is raising the bottom, by providing people with a certain threshold level of ability to, say, get things on the political agenda and influence candidates and office-holders, and that it is not so important to curtailing the amount of money that the rich can spend on these things. This sounds surprising to me, but it is an empirical question on which I will not speculate further.

Let me conclude by saying something about two important issues that are often seen as raising questions of equality: education and executive compensation. Demands for equality in education can arise from several of the sources I have mentioned. Perhaps the most obvious is the demand flowing from the requirement of fair equality of opportunity, which I have already discussed. What this requires is not the same education for all, but the same *opportunity* to develop one's talents. It is therefore compatible, for example, with admissions requirements in schools and universities, but not with tuitions that prevent the poor but talented from gaining access to education for which they are qualified. A second demand, flowing from the requirements of fairness of the political system, is that everyone should have access to sufficient education to function as a citizen.

A third is that insofar as education is a good that it is the duty of the state to provide, it must provide it to all, so as to meet the requirement of equal benefit. But what does "equal" mean here? I do not believe that it means that the same education must be available to all. What government should provide is at most education which one needs

and for which one is qualified. Providing disabled or disadvantaged students with special educational opportunities is not a violation of Equal Benefit any more than it is a violation to provide more health care to those who are ill. And can also be compatible with Equal Benefit to provide different educational opportunities to those with special talents, but not to others who could not make use of them. I should add, however that on any reasonable understanding there is a limit to the level of education that the state has a strict obligation to provide (the kind of obligation required to trigger the principle of Equal Benefit.) Much education for the specially talented may fall beyond this limit, and thus be a benefit that the state is free to provide for reasons of economic efficiency or in order to promote cultural values.

These inequalities may, however, be objected to on other egalitarian grounds. Some may object that a policy of providing unequal levels of education—more for the talented—is objectionable because it results in a society divided between elite and non-elite. In this case we have a case where the demands of equality (understood in terms of what I have called status) simply have to be balanced against other values, such as efficiency and the intrinsic value of the intellectual products that specialized higher education makes possible. My purpose here is simply to use this example to illustrate my point that the demands of equality arise from diverse sources, which may have different weights in different cases.

The enormously high levels of compensation that corporate executives receive in the United States and, I understand, it may increasingly be a problem in China as well. These are widely seen as objectionable. They are also naturally seen not only as objectionable *and* a form of inequality (a judgment I share) but as objectionable *because*

of the inequality they involve. So I want to consider whether this judgment would be supported by the analysis of equality that I have been presenting.

One reason that might be advanced for taxing the very high salaries of corporate officers is that this is the best, and perhaps the fairest, way to raise needed revenue. How much of a sacrifice is it to pay a 40% or higher tax rate on one's income over US\$200,000, when one has a total income of over US\$1,000,000? Surely not much. So the discomfort of high taxes for the rich is much less than that of even lower taxes for the poor. This seems correct to me, but it is not an essentially egalitarian idea. It is not an objection to high levels of compensation, but only an observation about how best to raise revenue, given that some people have very high incomes. But the salaries themselves seem somehow objectionable. So what is the objection to them, and how can it best be articulated?

Looking at the list I have given, we might say that these levels of compensation are objectionable because they will, at least over time, undermine equality of opportunity, and also because they give these people unacceptable political power in the form of ability to buy influence by giving large contributions to political candidates and parties. I have just discussed these problems, and I will not repeat that discussion here.

Another possible objection is that these levels of compensation create a new class of privileged people, who live in a style very different from the rest of us "ordinary" folks, and thereby create objectionable differences in status. I don't know how things are in China, but it is noteworthy that in the United States this idea seems not to have much political support. "Elitism" is a term that we hear a lot in political discourse, and it seems to be used to tap into a strong vein of resentment. But this resentment is not against the

very rich, but rather against the well-educated (more specifically the well-educated who are “liberal” in the American sense of that term. I am not at all certain why this is so. I think it may be that what people resent is not those who live better than they do but rather those who are *critical* of the way they live (by arguing that they should not drive so much, should not smoke, or should do more to prevent global warming.) The right has been very successful in twisting the egalitarian idea of anti-elitism into a reactionary notion. I hope that this has not happened, or will not happen in China, where you have what I hope is a stronger egalitarian tradition.

Egalitarian objections to executive compensation may reflect an idea of desert not included on my list. For example, it might reflect the idea that every person’s day’s labor is worth the same reward. This idea may have some appeal, but it is far from being recognized in most of the judgments we commonly make. There are many examples of people with large incomes which people do not seem to find objectionable in the way that the incomes of highly paid executives are. Some examples include: people who win the lottery or sell their houses, or some valuable piece of property, for a large sum. Nor do the large incomes of sports figures or entertainment personalities seem to arouse the resentment that executive compensation does. These people may live in a lavish style, but that is not offensive to the rest of us (we may even enjoy reading about them.) The fact that they are so highly rewarded may indicate something amiss about the values of our society, but that is not a question of justice.

There is, however, a strong objection to extremely high levels of executive compensation that is not an objection based on the inequality that results. Leaving aside the effects of inequality, these levels of compensation are objectionable because they are



an abuse of power, or result from a misallocation of power. It is unjustifiable for executives to have the power to assign themselves and their friends these exorbitant compensation packages. The inequalities that result are objectionable because of the mechanism that produces them, although they may also have effects that are objectionable for other reasons. This explains our reaction to the other examples I mentioned. Large gains through property transactions, or from contracts in entertainment and sports, do not involve the same kind of abuse (or misallocation) of power, although they may, as I have said, be objectionable for other reasons.

This way of putting the objection also has the advantage of directing our attention toward remedies other than redistributive taxation: toward legal restrictions on corporate governance, for example. It is better, and causes less resentment, to prevent these large compensation packages from occurring rather than trying to tax them away later. So it seems to me that, although high levels of executive compensation do raise legitimate egalitarian concerns, the best way of addressing this problem may not bring equality to the fore.

### **Appendix: Equality and Liberty**

In this lecture, and in the process of reflection that it reports, I have tried to identify what seems to me to be the diverse reasons we have for being concerned with inequality, and to consider how these various reasons bear on some questions facing us. Since my analysis may seem to some to have a somewhat deflationary character, let me emphasize that I approach this question as someone who is committed to the value of equality. My aim has been to strengthen this commitment by clarifying the nature of the values at stake and the basis of their appeal. As an illustration of how this might be done,

I will add here some preliminary thoughts about what my analysis of the case for equality might imply about the relation between equality and liberty.

The idea that there is a fundamental conflict between liberty and equality is widespread. As long as it is seen simply as a conflict between two basic values, it seems to be a conflict in which the “equality” side is in the weaker position. This is because “liberty” is perceived as a self-evidently important goal, in a way that “equality” is not. It makes sense to ask why equality (particularly equality in the possession of various specific goods) is so important, and it seems to many people that the answer to this question is not obvious. But it seems more obvious that liberty is something important, and that it is reasonable to object to anything that interferes with it. One of the aims of my analysis of equality is to break down this apparent asymmetry, by giving more specific content to the case for equality.

It seems to me quite reasonable to ask why equality is important. The answers lie in the various reasons we have for objecting to specific forms of inequality. Similarly, the reasons we have for objecting to “infringements of liberty” are not explained by appeal to a single, fundamental value, “liberty,” but rather by appeal to the different values that are at stake in different cases in which liberty is said to be infringed. I have tried to clarify and strengthen the case for equality by identifying the diverse reasons we have for objecting to inequality. Doing this also forces us to identify the particular forms of “liberty” that may be at stake in these cases and to assess their value. It thereby puts us in a better position to decide how these conflicts should be resolved. To make this more specific, let me consider briefly each of the reasons I have identified for seeking greater equality, and consider what kinds of liberty, if any, they conflict with.

1. **Humanitarian concern**—In some cases, I have said, the reason for doing what will have the effect of reducing inequality is simply that this is a way of reducing suffering, by improving the condition of the poor. So these are not instances of a clash between equality and liberty (or anything else) because the case for transferring resources is based not on the value of equality but on the claims to aid on the part of those who are very badly off. Insofar as there is controversy, it is over the extent of these claims. Some might object to more extensive claims to aid on the ground that they interfere with the liberty of the better off. But insofar as what is appealed to here is *liberty*, understood broadly enough to be infringed by having to pay higher taxes, liberty is at stake on both sides, since the liberty of those in dire need of assistance is presumably very limited. And would be considerably enhanced by aid.

2. **Status**—It is important to note the great variety of claims that might be included in this category. To start at one extreme, objections to caste systems and other forms of institutionalized discrimination are among the strongest objections to inequality, and the most purely egalitarian. The conflict in such cases is between, on the one hand, the claim of some to enjoy the privileges and the sense of superiority that such institutions confer on them, and, on the other hand, the claim that others have not to be marked as inferior in a way that is unjustified and that they reasonably find humiliating. I suppose that the former might be described as a claim to a form of “liberty,” but once we see what is involved this label does not give these claims any greater force.

Moving now to the opposite extreme, some extremely weak, or dubious, egalitarian claims might also be put forward under the heading of “status.” People who

are simply envious of the greater success and accomplishments of others may claim that they find recognition of these accomplishments humiliating and “elitist,” thus attempting to make their envy seem more legitimate by cloaking it in egalitarian terminology. It is important to recognize that claims of equality can be, and have been, have been misused in this way.<sup>16</sup>

It may be plausible to say in these cases that what the better off rightfully object to being deprived of is a form of liberty—the liberty to develop one’s talents and strive for success (and to be rewarded for doing so.) But the reason why the claims of the worse off should be rejected here is not that in these cases (but not the previous ones) these claims conflict with liberty. The point is rather that the supposed injuries in these cases are illusory, and that the opportunities that the better off want not to be deprived of are valuable, whether or not they are called a form of liberty.

**3. Domination**—In this case, the considerations that speak in favor of reducing inequality are the reasons people have to avoid having their lives controlled by others. Although these reasons count here in favor of greater equality, it would be quite reasonable to describe them as claims to liberty rather than equality. One might say that what these reasons are in conflict with in this case are the reasons that others have to maintain control over the lives of others. But this would be prejudicial. As I said above, control over the lives of others can result simply from a high degree of economic inequality. So the ability of some to control their own lives may be in conflict simply with the reasons others have to amass more money by enlarging their business enterprises. When this is so, it would be fair to say that we have a conflict between two

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<sup>16</sup> A number of people whom I talked with when I presented a version of this paper in China were understandably wary of the idea of equality because they felt that it had been

kinds of liberty. To decide how this conflict is to be resolved we need to decide which form of liberty is more important at the margin (that is to say, taking into account the levels at which these forms of liberty are already enjoyed by the respective parties.)

4. **Procedural Fairness**—I said that in some cases we have reason to reduce inequality because this is necessary to ensure the fairness of our basic institutions: for example, to ensure equality of economic opportunity or the fairness of political institutions. What counts in favor of greater equality in these cases are the reasons that people have to want to be able to compete (on fair terms) for economic advantage, or to play a role in the process through which their society is governed. These considerations, again, could reasonably be called claims of liberty. The first, in particular, (the opportunity to compete for economic gain) is the sort of thing that libertarians generally include under this heading. One might also say, however, that what counts here in favor of greater equality are simply considerations of fairness, and that everyone, whatever their position in society, has an interest in having their institutions be fair, so that their relations with their fellow citizens will be of a desirable and defensible character, and so that whatever they gain from their institutions will be gained *fairly*, and hence will be legitimate. I believe these are things that people have reason to care about and really do care about. What threatens fairness in the cases I have been considering is a high degree of economic inequality. So, as in the previous case, what we have on one side of this conflict are the reasons people have for wanting to be able to gain large fortunes, and to exercise the political influence that comes with this. But if inequality renders political institutions unfair, then this influence is illegitimate. And, the legitimacy of economic rewards is also undermined when these are gained through institutions that are unfair. So,

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misused in this way during the Cultural Revolution.

to sum up, what we have in this case, on the side of greater equality, are claims of liberty supplemented by considerations of fairness, and on the other side we have different claims of liberty which are *undermined* by considerations of fairness.

**5. Equality of Benefit**—Here the idea is that if the government (or some other agent) is obligated to provide every member of a certain group with some good, and they all have the same claim to it, then this good should be provided to all at the same level. In the event of unequal provision, the objection that can be raised by those who receive lesser benefits is not to the idea that equality in itself is a good, but rather that their claim to this good is the same as that of others. Their appeal is thus to something like equal protection of the laws. It is not clear what those who have greater shares can say in response. Perhaps they might make a claim of liberty in the form of an objection to paying the higher taxes that would be required if all were to be provided with this good at the level they now enjoy. But this claim seems weak. The obvious reply is that if they want to pay lower taxes they must accept benefits as the lower level that could be provided to all.

To sum up: The idea that there is a fundamental conflict between liberty and equality may seem plausible in the abstract. But its plausibility diminishes when we consider the specific reasons that actually support the reduction of inequalities, and the specific reasons that might be offered in response.