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Morality and unjust inequality

Neelke Doorn and Pauline Kleingeld

This book takes a moral perspective on social inequality. This prompts the immediate question what morality is. Morality refers to the set of most fundamental rules and values that provide guidance on how one ought to act. Different ethical theories take different points of departure to articulate the relevant criteria. According to some theories, the criterion for right action is formulated in terms of the *outcomes* of one's actions; according to others, what matters most is that one acts on the right underlying *principles*. The first type of theory is called 'consequentialist', the second 'deontological'. For consequentialist theories, an act is considered right if it leads to better overall outcomes, for example if the well-being of people improves. In a deontological framework, an act is right if it is in accordance with a good principle or an appropriate value. Although consequentialist and deontological theories are fundamentally different, they may overlap when it comes to concrete duties. For example, leading con-

sequentialist and deontological theories hold that individuals have a moral duty to help people in need and to promote general well-being.

Both consequentialist and deontological theories may consider social inequality as undesirable or wrong. From a consequentialist perspective, if reducing inequality improves the total amount of well-being, inequality should be reduced. From a deontological perspective, reducing inequality may be required because equality itself is considered of value, for example, or because an equal distribution is considered more fair. Not all moral theorists regard all forms of social inequality as necessarily unjust, since some inequalities may be the result of genuinely voluntary decisions (for example, a personal preference to adopt a minimalist lifestyle). Thus, morality requires us to reduce *unjust* inequalities. This book explores what different inequalities may be at stake in the different domains and which ones should be considered unjust.



we must ask ourselves what we can do to offer everyone the same opportunities, instead of simply attributing different outcomes to individual choices and achievements – as we so often do.

And if people not only seek to differentiate themselves from others, but also have the desire to belong, this may be used to help them change their behaviour.

Finally, it helps to know that social unrest also reflects people's anxieties about the threat they experience to the *values* that are important to them, and to the moral principles they endorse. This knowledge implies that we should not consider economic outcomes alone, but that we also need to reassure people about the moral implications of current developments in society.

The structure of this book

The chapters in this book address the causes and consequences of social inequality by taking an often-overlooked perspective that goes beyond individualistic economic approaches. We view individuals as part of a collective or as members of a social group. We also consider the possibility that some groups have an interest in the maintenance of social inequality, while others aim to reduce it (see Box 1.6). In performing this exercise, we examine the added value of taking a *moral* perspective. Key questions are whether people are treated equally, and if not, whether we can arrive at

a more equitable distribution by using the power of moral arguments – i.e., the desire to do the right thing (see Box 1.7). The first two chapters focus on the novel insight this perspective yields into the way in which inequality impacts on *education* and *work*. We also consider the effects that inequality can have on our *health*. The inequality between various groups in society is discussed in the chapter on *migration*. In the final chapter, we examine how taking a moral perspective changes the way we consider the inequality between different parts of the world with regard to the causes and effects of *climate change*.

For each of these subjects, we examine the added value of taking a moral perspective. When each of us pursues our own interests, this does not make the world a better place for everyone. Increasing the inequalities between people living together in the same society carries significant costs and introduces risks that affect us all. We examine the implicit mechanisms that play a role in this process. In turn, these illustrate that the use of economic incentives that make people optimize their own outcomes does not resolve the problems identified here. The only way to combat social inequality is to recognize that opportunities are not the same for everyone. Only when we ask ourselves how we can ensure that everyone is treated fairly can we begin to understand what we need to do.

