What’s Wrong With Inequality?

This interview, the third in a series on political topics, discusses philosophical ideas that underlie recent debates about inequality. My interviewee is Elizabeth Anderson, a professor of philosophy and women’s studies at the University of Michigan. She is the author of “The Imperative of Integration.” — Gary Gutting

GARY GUTTING: Public policy debates, particularly about economic issues, are often about how to treat people fairly. You argue for “democratic equality,” which says that treating people fairly requires treating them as equals. What do you mean by equality?

ELIZABETH ANDERSON: Talk about equality gets off on the wrong foot if we start from the assumption that it expresses an immediate moral demand to treat everyone the same. Of course, there are thousands of legitimate reasons why people may treat different individuals differently. What egalitarianism objects to are social hierarchies that unjustly put different people into superior and inferior positions.

G.G.: Let’s get specific. What do you see as unequal treatments that are unjust?

E.A.: Of course, there are standard cases of discrimination on the basis of antipathy against, or favoritism towards, arbitrary identity groups — such as race, gender and sexual orientation. But I want to stress the many ways in which unjust social hierarchy is manifested in other ways besides direct discrimination or formally differential treatment. The discrimination/differential treatment idea captures only a small part of what counts as unjust inequality.

On this broader view of unjust inequality, we can see three different types of social hierarchy at work. One is inequalities of standing, which weigh the interests of members of some groups more heavily than others. For example, perhaps out of negligence, a courthouse or hotel may lack elevators and ramps for people in wheelchairs. A law firm may promote a culture of off-hours socializing over drinks between partners and associates that excludes women who need to spend time with their children from opportunities for networking and promotion. As Anatole France noted, “The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges.”

Another type of social hierarchy is inequalities of power: when some groups exercise arbitrary, unaccountable power over subordinates, and can order them around or harass and abuse them, without subordinates’ having a voice in how they are treated. Traditional hierarchies, as of masters over slaves, landlords over serfs, and dictators over subjects, are of this sort. In many cases, the contemporary boss/employee relation also fits this mold, for particularly tyrannical bosses and for workers in menial occupations, such as crop-picking, slaughterhouse work and domestic service.

Third is inequalities of esteem: when some groups stigmatize, insult or demean others and monopolize honorable status to themselves. A lot of the unjust inequality suffered by L.B.G.T people, people with disabilities, immigrants, the poor and the mentally ill works through demeaning and even demonizing representations of who they are.

G.G.: You’ve mentioned inequalities of standing, power and esteem. What about inequalities in material goods?
E.A.: Here one important source of injustice is failing to insure people against misfortunes such as poverty, disability, illness and involuntary unemployment.

G.G.: Just when do people deserve protection from overwhelming misfortune? One popular idea is what you’ve called “luck egalitarianism.” On this view, people should suffer the consequences of choices they’ve freely made, but should be protected against losses that they couldn’t have avoided. We eliminate inequalities that are due to sheer bad luck, but we allow those that result from bad decisions. Many people find this an appealing position, but you reject it. Why is that?

E.A.: There are many examples that go counter to luck egalitarianism. How tall people are is largely determined by genetic luck. But this does not make it unjust for professional basketball teams to offer better opportunities to taller players. When we chose people on merit, we’re very often choosing them because they are lucky enough to have certain talents. There is nothing wrong with this — indeed, we all benefit from it — so long as society offers fair prospects to everyone to develop their talents.

At the same time, even the uninsured motorcyclist who is injured because he chose to drive recklessly without a helmet should have his injuries treated. There are some situations in which it’s unjust not to help people, no matter how they landed in the situation.

G.G.: O.K., so bad luck shouldn’t guarantee compensatory measures, and bad choices shouldn’t exclude assistance. Still, it seems obvious that sometimes it’s right to help those who have bad luck and sometimes it’s right to refuse help to those who’ve made bad choices. How do you suggest deciding which to do when?

E.A.: I think the critical issues for equality concern the range of opportunities available to people, far more than whether choice or luck lands them in one spot or another in that range. Even if being gay were wholly a matter of choice, that would still not justify treating gay people as a stigmatized outcaste group. So the fact that people come to occupy different positions in a social hierarchy as a result of choices they make doesn’t suffice to justify that hierarchy. Many types of hierarchy are unjust no matter how people land in the unequal positions that hierarchy creates.

G.G.: What’s involved in providing an adequate range of opportunities?

E.A.: For one thing, we need laws against employment discrimination on the basis of identities such as race and gender. Likewise, the fact that different occupations receive unequal pay can readily create class distinctions that are passed from parents to their children. To prevent this, we need to ensure that everyone has a fair chance to move up the economic ladder. This requires fair educational opportunities, and such things as health and unemployment insurance.

Extreme wealth inequality also leads to the de facto control of government by the rich (plutocracy), and so is incompatible with democracy. For this reason we need to disperse concentrated wealth through property and inheritance taxes, or even better, revise rules that allow excessive concentrations of wealth to build up in the first place. For example, stronger anti-trust regulations, particularly for banks, are probably worth investigating.

G.G.: Granting that equality is important, it would seem that freedom is at least as important. But aren’t the two in tension, since maintaining equality requires taking
from those who have more and giving to those who have less? What do you say to those who think this way?

E.A.: Of course, taxes on income and wealth limit the freedom of those who would otherwise acquire huge shares. Still, that is only one side of the coin. The objection is like opposing stoplights on the grounds that they limit the freedom of movement of people in cars at red lights. Sure, but what about the people on the cross-streets, who can move more freely because cars have to stop? If we’re worried about how limiting wealth will affect freedom, we have to take account of how the freedom of people generally, across all social positions, will be affected by the limitations. More egalitarian distributions of wealth spread opportunity and hence freedom more widely and fully than systems in which wealth is concentrated in a tiny self-perpetuating class.

G.G.: Does this mean that you favor eliminating the capitalist economic system, which seems to be a main source of economic inequalities?

E.A.: No, I take for granted that private property and extensive markets will play indispensable roles in any modern free society of equals. This will generate some distributive inequality. Complete equality would require a command economy, which is incompatible not just with freedom, but also with equality. State Communism, for example, is a social hierarchy of domination and subordination based on party membership.

G.G.: So you want to maintain capitalism but with sufficient social programs and restrictions on wealth to assure a fair opportunity for everyone to succeed within the system. Why do you think this is possible? What if capitalism can’t maintain an adequate level of production, particularly in a global economy, without extreme economic inequalities?

E.A.: That objection depends on unrealistic ideas about how incentives work. Current justifications for extreme inequality of income and wealth grossly exaggerate their positive incentive effects, and underestimate their negative effects. Consider the fact that top German and Japanese executives earn far less than their counterparts in the U.S. or U.K., but their firms are just as productive. Even within the U.S., there is virtually no correlation between pay and performance for top executives. Studies show that excessive incentives for work requiring innovative thinking can actually depress productivity by focusing people’s minds on money rather than the task at hand.

On the bottom end, outright cash transfers to the poor have been found to be hugely successful in promoting productivity in many places, including Brazil, Kenya and even North Carolina. Far from making them lazy, the poor use the extra resources supplied by cash transfers to enhance productivity. They improve their parenting, advance the education of their children, and give them more nutritious food. High inequality, if anything, has negative effects on economic growth, by making the economy more vulnerable to crises and long recessions, and by corrupting the political process. When the rich capture politics, they mainly use their influence to limit competition from below and extract rents from everyone else. This depresses growth.

G.G.: You said the other major problem with social hierarchies arises when people have a status determined by their identity group (race, gender, etc.). How do you analyze the injustice of such inequalities?
E.A.: The only just inequalities are those that promote everyone’s interests. Hierarchies based on identity groups violate this standard, because they gratuitously subordinate some people for the sake of arbitrarily exalting others. Because there are some social problems that hierarchy is needed to solve, it is important to sharply distinguish who you are from what you do. Authority — the power to issue legitimate orders to others — attaches to offices, not persons.

The egalitarian objection to hierarchies based on group identities is grounded in this idea: no one is entitled to any authoritative office, or should be doomed to subordinate office, based simply on who they are — that is, on some group identity. Nor should authority be attached to group identity: men are not entitled to order women around, nor are whites entitled to order blacks around. Such hierarchies, far from promoting everyone’s interests, raise up some groups at others’ expense.

G.G.: What about cases in which an identity group is strongly under- or overrepresented — when, for example, women have far fewer positions than men in high-paying fields, or when far more blacks than whites are convicted for certain crimes? Some claim that such disproportions are in themselves strong evidence for injustice. What’s your view on this?

E.A.: Given the long histories of imposed disadvantage against women and nonwhite racial groups, no observed group inequality along these lines is entitled to a free pass based on a mere speculation that groups have different preferences. It is reasonable to suspect that current inequalities reflect group-based disadvantages, such as intentional or unconscious discrimination, institutions arbitrarily tailored to the advantage of traditionally exalted groups, segregation, stigmatization, and other legacies of explicit group oppression. Of course, in any particular instance, empirical investigation is needed to pinpoint whether and what unjust disadvantages exist, and how to dismantle them.

G.G.: There are those who would say that there is now widespread agreement that it’s wrong to give people lower status because of who they are (their identity groups). Since this has been long established in law and supported for many years by affirmative action programs, they ask: Why is there anything more that needs to be done?

E.A.: Societies can’t practice racial oppression for hundreds of years, or gender subordination for thousands of years, without perverse ideas and feelings about race and gender becoming deeply entrenched. It takes a lot more than a few anti-discrimination laws and ameliorative policies to undo entrenched identity-based hierarchies. The legacies of slavery and Jim Crow continue to reproduce racial inequality today, through racial stigmatization, conscious and unconscious racial discrimination, grossly excessive and arbitrary policing and incarceration, and residential segregation.

Similarly, regarding gender hierarchy, women face routine sexual denigration, harassment, and assault on the streets, at work, school, home and in the media. They are still constrained by social norms and economic constraints regarding their sexuality, reproduction and domestic roles that keep them systematically disadvantaged. We have a lot more work to do to create a true society of equals.

G.G.: I wonder if we need to distinguish the cases of those who are poor and those who are not. While we still have a good way to go, the treatment of women and minorities has much improved among people well above the poverty line. But don’t the poor bear
the brunt of racial and gender inequality? And doesn’t this suggest that eliminating poverty is now the key to achieving racial and gender equality?

E.A.: Poverty is certainly a serious problem in the U.S. and the world. The poor suffer more from virtually every other identity-based inequality. Nevertheless we should not reduce other inequalities to poverty, or even to class inequality. Consider the fact that young college women suffer significant rates of sexual assault, even if they aren’t poor, and that they still rarely get justice in the courts or the wider culture. Consider the fact that police target black men for suspicion and arrest even if they are wearing business attire.

Even if we consider only class relations, objectionable forms of social hierarchy reach deeply into the middle class. Bosses can, and do, fire middle managers for taking off-hours political positions that they disapprove of. This is your plutocracy at work, and it doesn’t only affect the poor. The wages of the bottom 90 percent have been stagnant since the mid-1970s even as productivity has galloped ahead. If you want to think about class inequality, it’s worth considering how the rules of the economic game have been rigged to favor the top 10 percent, and the top 1 percent at the expense of everyone else. Class inequality is not just about poverty, and it’s not just about the distribution of income and wealth. When bosses fire workers for their sexual orientation or political views, we observe abuses of power that aren’t just about money.

This interview was conducted by email and edited. Other installments in this series can be read here.

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