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Is Income Inequality Unjust?

Perspectives from Political Philosophy

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have argued recently (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010) that income inequality produces many kinds of social and health problems in rich countries.¹ High rates of infant mortality, teenage births, crime and obesity, educational under-achievement, low life expectancy, social mobility and many other social problems are worse, they claim, in more unequal societies. They further argue that these problems are caused not by *absolute* deprivation (poverty) but by *relative* deprivation, and that they are best addressed by compressing the income distribution, even if this means slowing or entirely stopping economic growth. Moreover, their argument has the further implication that more could be done for underprivileged groups in society by reducing the gap between the rich and the poor than by investing more resources in public services.

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Unsurprisingly, this thesis has become quite controversial, with responses dividing along familiar partisan lines. Many people on the political left were cheered by the apparently scientific evidence of the badness of inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett themselves wanted to call their book 'Evidence-based politics' (p.ix)), while many people on the political right attacked what they saw as the book's misleading use of statistics (Saunders, 2010; Snowdon, 2010). The debate has become quite polarized, with attributions of bad faith on both sides (*The Spirit Level: Spooking the Right* 2010; see also the responses by Snowdon and Saunders in the letters section of the *Guardian*, 28 July 2010).

I do not aim to adjudicate this debate in this paper, though I should note that some critiques of Wilkinson and Pickett's research do seem to raise valid points that at the very least would qualify their claims. Thus, for example, the associations they report are often not robust to the inclusion or exclusion of particular countries or to controls for per capita income, and cultural factors potentially underlying *both* income inequality and health and social outcomes are not properly explored (Saunders, 2010; O'Connell, 2010). And some recent

research on the relationship between inequality and health over time has not confirmed the Wilkinson and Pickett thesis (Leigh, Jencks and Smeeding, 2009). Nevertheless, I would not be surprised if something like the Wilkinson and Pickett thesis is reasonably close to the truth. Even if some of the particular studies or correlations they use overstate the effects of income inequality, it is the *cumulative* evidence that matters, and this cumulative picture does seem to suggest that high levels of income inequality are at the very least associated with bad social outcomes, though the exact effect of inequality in

by the concepts of justice, freedom and power. Yet Wilkinson and Pickett do not typically speak of income inequality as just or unjust. Their case against inequality is instead presented in straightforwardly consequentialist terms, and articulated without much reference to ideas of justice (the word only appears in their book in the context of the criminal justice system). Nevertheless, they clearly believe that the consequences of income inequality are unjust (see, for example, p.84), and it is clear that Wilkinson and Pickett would agree with the view that income inequality is unjust, not merely

relationship between income inequality and questions of justice, freedom and power. I stick closely to those views I consider significant and plausible, and point out some of their broad policy implications along the way, but I do not claim comprehensiveness. I nevertheless argue that the most plausible views of justice indicate that income inequality is not always unjust.

Is income equality always desirable?

In order to isolate what we think is valuable about income equality, it is worth looking at a negative example: the communist societies of Eastern Europe. These societies typically had a very low level of income inequality: the average of estimates of the Gini coefficient in a set of communist societies for which data exists in the period 1960–1993 is about 0.24, much lower than the average 0.34 for a set of rich capitalist societies throughout that same period, and the level of measured income inequality in communist societies is almost always below that of rich societies.² Moreover, although most of these communist societies were not as rich as Western European democracies (and the gap grew over time), some of them did achieve high levels of development measured both by GDP per capita and by other indicators.³ Evidence also indicates that citizens in these societies believed that high levels of income inequality were unjustified and preferred a low level of income inequality (Gijssberts, 2002). Yet most of us would agree that the mechanism through which income equality was achieved in these cases violated rights that we would consider to be fundamental. More importantly, these societies were not really *equal* in an important sense of the term: although income differentials didn't matter much for ordinary social life, inequalities of *political access* mattered enormously. Where money does not matter much for social life, other inequalities – of political access, class background and the like – can assume a tremendous importance. Indeed, although citizens in Eastern Europe thought income equality was generally a good thing, they did not think these other inequalities were legitimate or that income equality in any way compensated for these

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producing such outcomes, and the ways in which inequality interacts with other factors (including culture and economic growth), remain obscure. So in what follows I will simply assume that there is an *association* between income inequality and various bad social outcomes, though I remain agnostic on both its magnitude and the exact mechanism that may cause it, and in particular on whether, as Wilkinson and Pickett argue, increased stress caused by status competition in income unequal societies is to blame.

But even if Wilkinson and Pickett are correct that inequality (and not simply poverty) causes many sorts of social and health problems, there can still be reasonable debate about the appropriate level of income inequality in a society and about the permissibility of various means to achieve equality. In particular, I argue that in a democratic society which values individual freedom, there will be sometimes less reason to worry about income inequality and more reason to worry about other forms of inequality.

Political philosophy and political theory normally investigate issues of inequality through the lenses provided

deplorable (see, for example, pp.247–9, where they mention our natural intuitions about fairness), even if only on account of its consequences. But I shall argue that if the question concerns the justice of income inequality, then, contrary to Wilkinson and Pickett's hopes for an 'evidence-based politics', there can be no 'scientific' determination of the right level of inequality in a society. Though evidence of the deleterious effects of inequality should be incorporated into public debate, ultimately the appropriate level of income inequality in a society is a moral question on which citizens will reasonably disagree, not a scientific question that can be settled more or less objectively.

In what follows, I provide a 'map' of the different views one might have about the justice or injustice of income inequality from the perspective of political philosophy and political theory. The terrain that the conceptual lenses provided by the concepts of power, freedom and justice reveal is complex and highly contested, and I cannot do more than provide a small glimpse of the problems involved in thinking about the

other inequalities (for some evidence in the case of the GDR, see Pfaff, 2006).

The point of this example is not to ridicule any concern with income inequality, or to suggest that the only way of achieving equality is to turn the country into a communist dictatorship. After all, the levels of equality in Sweden or Japan – the countries that Wilkinson and Pickett single out as the most equal in their sample – can be achieved within the framework of a typical capitalist economy through taxes and transfers (within the limits given by the efficiency losses induced by high taxes, available technologies of tax evasion, the political resistance of the rich, and the malleability of cultural ideas about what constitutes ‘excessive’ taxation). Nevertheless, the example serves to indicate that we care about more than mere income inequality: we also care about both the processes through which income equality and inequality are generated, and about the pattern of *other* inequalities in society, especially inequalities that result in what we might call ‘unequal citizenship’. To the extent that the process that allocates incomes is perceived as fair, then the resulting distribution will be seen as less problematic (and vice versa). And, similarly, to the extent that inequalities in income are not seen to be implicated in inequalities of power and status which result in domination, they will also appear as less problematic (and vice versa).⁴

Stated positively though abstractly, we might say that an equal society is a society in which the process that results in the allocation of incomes to individuals is fair, i.e. it respects their equal moral worth, and this distribution is not implicated in hierarchies of domination which diminish the worth of their equal citizenship. It is *not* necessarily a society with a high level of income equality, though it may well be the case that high or rising levels of income inequality provide *evidence* (not necessarily decisive) that something has gone wrong with the process of allocation or the relationship between income and other social goods.

Three views

The key to the question of the justice of income equality or inequality, then, lies

both in what we mean by a ‘fair’ process for the allocation of incomes in a society, and in how we conceive of the relationship between income inequality and other forms of inequality in a given society. From this point of view, we can think of three kinds of reasons for claiming that income inequality is unjust.

1 First, we might think that income inequality is unjust because it is currently produced by an unfair system of allocation, *regardless* of any bad health or social problems inequality might cause (that is,

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whether or not Wilkinson and Pickett are correct in thinking that income inequality produces all sorts of health and social problems). This may be because of contingent features of the economic system (perhaps historical expropriation, or current corruption) or it may be, more radically, because (we may think) the sort of market system of allocation prevailing today rewards people ultimately for things they have no control over (like their good genes and talents, or their good upbringing, or the fact that they were born in a well-governed country, or even their propensity for hard work), above and beyond any other historical or current injustices that affect the distribution of income and wealth.

Though this latter position may appear remote from common beliefs, it should be noted that it has substantial philosophical support. For example, the philosopher John Rawls argued that ‘[t]here is no more reason to permit the distribution of income and wealth to be settled by

the distribution of natural assets than by historical and social fortune’ and that ‘[t]hose who have been favored by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune only on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out’, since society is a system of co-operation set up for the benefit of all (Rawls, 1999, pp.64, 87). Later philosophers developed these observations into a more systematic theory of what has come to be called ‘luck egalitarianism’ (Cohen, 2000, 2008; Dworkin, 1981; Arneson, 1989;

Parijs, 1995; the term was invented by a critic, Anderson, 1999). If the rich man who inherits his money cannot be said to ‘deserve’ that money (he is just lucky), why should a person whose skills are suddenly in demand be said to deserve the income he or she earns on that basis, especially since our talents and skills themselves depend to a large degree on things we inherited and on the complementary skills of others? But, luck egalitarians say, a fair system of allocation cannot reward people differentially on the basis of morally irrelevant features; it can only reward or punish them for those acts for which they are fully responsible (perhaps only hard work after adulthood, though even this is doubtful if the propensity for hard work is inherited).

In practice, this means either that the rules of social interaction should be set up so that any inequalities are always to the advantage of the worst-off group in society (that is, if inequalities exist at all, they should be

such that getting rid of the inequality would make the worst-off group in society even worse off: this is Rawls' 'difference principle') or (assuming a market society) that the wealthy should compensate the poor for their ill fortune. The specific remedies proposed by people in this tradition vary, but they include such ideas as a 'universal basic income' (Parijs, 1995) and a significant degree of industrial reorganisation (including workers' control of enterprises, a solution

public provision of high-quality, universal education and healthcare, and the like. Income inequality might still exist in such a society, but it would not translate into other sorts of important inequalities (including the sorts of inequalities in health or education that Wilkinson and Pickett describe). Moreover, somebody who held this view would be wary of solutions which equalised income only to make other inequalities (in access to political power, for example)

produces the distribution of income, or about the connection between income and other social goods, or about the process through which income inequality produces bad outcomes. Can we, however, say something more about which of these views is most likely to be correct?

The first view – that inequality is bad so long as it is produced by an unfair set of rules for the allocation of the 'benefits and burdens of cooperation' (to use Rawls' terminology) – is unobjectionable when stated abstractly. In theory, we would all agree that if an inequality is the result of *injustice* (e.g., because the rich have stolen the property of the poor) then it should be rectified. The problem concerns precisely the determination of *which* conditions make a system of allocation unfair, and here we might expect reasonable and well-disposed citizens in a democratic society to disagree in ways that cannot always be eliminated simply by the provision of more information (e.g., information about the injustice of certain rules or laws). This is because in any genuinely free large-scale society, citizens' views of justice and the good life will be inescapably plural, even if they display some areas of agreement (what Rawls called an 'overlapping consensus'); specifically, they will differ in crucial respects regarding the specific conditions that make a system of allocation unjust. (Even highly trained philosophers disagree about this, after all.)

For example, the more radical view of the 'luck egalitarians', namely, that market systems of allocation ultimately reward people for things they are not responsible for and hence produce outcomes that are systematically unjust, relies on a controversial view of what sorts of things we can 'deserve' or 'be responsible' for. While most people would agree with luck egalitarian philosophers that we do not 'deserve' the good parents or natural talents that may enable us to succeed monetarily *ex ante* (we were not responsible for having such parents), some philosophers argue (Schmidt, 2006) and many people would agree that we can *come to deserve* these opportunities *ex post* (by, for example, demonstrating a willingness to work hard and to make the best of our inherited talents and

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3 favored by Rawls as well as Wilkinson and Pickett in *The Spirit Level*, pp.522-63).⁵

2 Second, we might think that even if current levels of income inequality are not produced by an unfair system of allocation, such inequality is nevertheless unjust to the degree to which money is transformed into social status, political power, educational achievement and the like: that is, to the degree to which income inequality produces other important inequalities and thus enables social and political domination (Walzer, 1983). But here the desired remedy is not for the wealthy to compensate the poor (that is, to simply equalise income), something that might make other sorts of resources 'dominant', but to break the connection between income and other important goods (including political power and social status) and in general to prevent the emergence of dominant hierarchies. Somebody concerned about the dominant role of income in social life might thus advocate for some degree of redistribution, but also for the regulation of money in politics,

more salient.

3 Finally, we might think (like Wilkinson and Pickett) that income inequality is unjust to the degree that it produces bad social outcomes for everyone, not just for the worst off in society (see especially chapters 1, 13 and 14), even if the process through which the inequality is generated can be generally considered fair and even if it is not particularly associated with other sorts of significant inequalities, like inequalities in political power (something which Wilkinson and Pickett do not necessarily believe: see chapter 15, especially pp.249-52). The argument here is straightforwardly consequentialist: inequality is unjust to the degree that it produces bad consequences, and should be reduced in order to decrease these bad consequences, but only to the extent that such inequality reductions actually decrease them without creating new bad consequences.

None of these views indicate that any given level of income inequality is bad in itself. To say that a *given* level of inequality is unjust always implies further judgments, either about the process that

resources). I do not mean to argue this one way or the other. My point is that moral judgments about which rules of allocation are fair are ultimately subject to reasonable disagreement among citizens, and hence cannot be settled scientifically but must be settled politically: that is, through open-ended debate in the public sphere.

Wilkinson and Pickett at times seem to flirt with the idea that all forms of market allocation are unfair (e.g., pp.254-72), but this is not their main argument. Instead, they sometimes suggest that income inequality is a proxy for objectionable forms of status inequality and domination (see chapter 3). In this they echo (not necessarily intentionally) some influential political theorists (e.g. Anderson, 1999; Walzer, 1983) who argue that we should be concerned with income inequality as a matter of justice (in contrast to charity or humanitarian concern) not because we are interested in fixing the great 'cosmic injustice' of individual differences (which, in market systems, often translate into income differences), but because we are interested in not being oppressed and dominated and treated contemptuously by others. We should thus care about income inequality to the extent that it prevents the establishment of a society of equals: a society of people who cannot dominate one another, and hence can respect each other's liberty. Such a society would have institutions that provide a 'decent minimum' to all citizens – enough to take full advantage of their rights and liberties – and would prevent income from turning into political and other forms of degrading social power, but not necessarily limit income inequality *per se*; for theorists like Anderson, envy is not a compelling reason to engage in redistribution, even if it produced stress and other bad health effects.⁶

This view was perhaps most clearly articulated by the philosopher Michael Walzer in his book *Spheres of Justice* (Walzer, 1983). Walzer argued that social life produces many goods (income, education, political power, social status, etc) in many spheres of life, each of which is distributed in culturally specific ways. We give political power to the persuasive, primary and secondary education to all,

university degrees to the academically qualified, and so on. The important point is that each of these goods has their own criteria for distribution, criteria that are themselves subject to discussion in a democratic society and cannot be simply imposed. Problems arise when the goods that should be distributed according to a particular criterion of distribution (e.g., academic merit or persuasiveness) are distributed according to another (e.g., income). This results in the *domination* of one good (income or political power,

transformed into unequal treatment by the law, for example. By the same token, we can be reasonably wary of interventions to limit income inequality, especially if they are designed in obscure and bureaucratic ways that enhance the discretionary power of government officials or push status competition into other spheres. If reducing the importance of income as a marker of status merely increases the importance of admission to a good university (as seems to be the case in Japan or France, where the

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for example) over the rest, transforming a society which may contain multiple non-overlapping spheres of distribution, some hierarchical and some not, into a single hierarchy.

Genuine equality thus depends on preventing illegitimate 'border crossings' – preventing money from turning into political power, or political power into money, or education into social status, and so on – according to the current understanding of what the proper boundaries of each sphere are: in an equal society, the rich are not simultaneously always the most educated, the most healthy, the most powerful, and so on.⁷ To be sure, one can certainly imagine that, as income differentials increase, money is translated more easily into power and dominating social status, so that an egalitarian society will have a permanent interest in reducing income differentials. Yet we are often not actually interested in the specifics of income equality or inequality (at least to the extent that we are not simply motivated by envy), but in not being dominated by those with money and in retaining our self-respect as equal citizens: income inequality is especially resented when it is clearly

top political and business positions are monopolised by graduates of a handful of top universities), this is not necessarily a gain from the point of view of this sort of egalitarianism, even if it is accompanied by better outcomes for certain health and social problems.⁸

Wilkinson and Pickett nevertheless argue that freedom and equality are perfectly compatible (pp.263-4) and suggest that 'equality' is simply another name for democracy. Yet their understanding of freedom is itself one that reasonable and well-disposed citizens may disagree with. An alternative conception of what liberty requires is perhaps most clearly articulated by Robert Nozick in his book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Nozick, 1974). Nozick argued, among other things, that it is a mistake to conceive of economic systems as places where we should get what we *deserve*; we instead should get what we choose, subject to the proviso that the choice is in fact genuine and not coerced. A fair distribution of income is not one that gives everyone what they deserve (as the luck egalitarians would argue), and certainly not one that preserves a particular *pattern* of distribution (e.g., a

certain level of inequality), but the one that would emerge from the (genuinely free) choices of individuals engaged in mutually beneficial exchanges with one another of things they can legitimately own, and that neither the state nor anyone else has a right to simply take from us, unless we have explicitly agreed to give them up. This idea can clearly be taken too far (for one thing, the ‘genuinely free’ proviso, as well as the question of what we can be said to own, are both difficult to specify and subject to reasonable disagreement), and there are many critiques of Nozick (Francis and Francis, 1976; Fried, 1995; Gregori, 1979; Nagel, 1975; Nock, 1992). My point is only that Nozick draws on a deep moral intuition about the importance of *choice* and *ownership* in a free society which resonates deeply with many citizens and cannot be simply attributed to their being ‘deceived’ about their true interests in a more equal distribution of income and wealth. To the extent that redistributive policies violate this intuition – that we are free people entitled to make choices about mutually beneficial exchanges and to keep what we have legitimately acquired – they will be subject to reasonable disagreement. From this point of view, again, the ‘appropriate’ level of inequality cannot be determined scientifically, but must result, in a democratic society, from the free play of arguments about the relative importance of free choice and ownership *vis-à-vis* other considerations.

Is there, finally, a purely consequentialist case for reducing inequality? Wilkinson and Pickett would argue that there is, in view of the health and social problems that inequality produces. It would certainly be good to be able to produce healthier and happier societies, and this sort of argument can potentially move the public conversation in more egalitarian directions. But the question of whether a more income-equal society is better cannot ultimately be settled by scientific evidence alone, even if it were irrefutable (which it is not, despite Wilkinson and Pickett’s rhetoric). One might be

reasonably wary of saying that we should engage in large-scale redistribution just because we might gain a little health and happiness without further evidence that current arrangements are in fact unfair or result in domination, and that measures to reduce inequality would not have a negative impact on other goods that we care about. To be sure, as I stressed above, increasing inequality might itself be evidence of an increasingly unfair system of distribution, or of increasing domination, but such judgments are ultimately dependent on moral intuitions about which citizens can and will reasonably disagree. Moreover, an excessive focus on *income* inequality obscures the complexity of the egalitarian ideal, as we have seen: other inequalities may often matter more than income inequality. And finally, an excessive focus on income inequality runs the risk of belittling other important goods that matter to us, like choice and ownership.⁹ The consequentialist frame is too thin to hang the argument for equality on.

Conclusion: income inequality and democracy

In a democratic society, views about the proper extent of inequality will necessarily differ, since they are based on contestable intuitions about what constitutes domination, what we ‘deserve’ and what kinds of exchanges we should be free to conduct. To be sure, some of these views can be influenced by the powerful; in societies like our own that are not ideally egalitarian this is always a possibility. But it is a mistake to think that the reason our society is not as egalitarian as (some of us) might like is simply that nefarious interests prevent the people from understanding their ‘true’ interests. Some of the frustration with earlier, perhaps more egalitarian, incarnations of the welfare state that is evident in the current political climate is attributable to less-than-noble feelings, but some of it is based on real intuitions about what it means to be an equal citizen. To argue for income equality is to enter a conversation

where there is much potential for disappointment: our arguments may fail to convince.

- 1 Wilkinson and Pickett focus on income inequality (rather than, for example, wealth inequality) in part due to data availability reasons, but also because they believe that income inequality is a good proxy for the forms of status hierarchy that determine the health and social outcomes they are interested in (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010, pp.26-9).
- 2 Communist countries include Bulgaria, China, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Rich countries include Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, the UK and USA. Data is from Deininger and Squire (1996). I have produced a scatterplot of these data here: <http://public.tableausoftware.com/workbooks/TrendsInIncomeInequality>.
- 3 Portugal and Hungary had roughly the same measured real GDP per capita until the late 1980s (somewhere between \$11,000 and \$10,000), according to the Penn World Table v.6.3 (Heston, Summers and Aten, 2009). Most communist societies also had relatively high life expectancies and literacy levels and low levels of ordinary violent crime.
- 4 This is complicated by the fact that people seem to underestimate the actual degree of income and wealth inequality in many societies (Osberg and Smeeding, 2006; Norton and Ariely, 2011), and even when they think inequality is excessive they may fail to connect these perceptions with public policy (Bartels, 2005). On the other hand, if people underestimate the actual degree of income and wealth inequality in society, perhaps because consumption inequality is actually lower than income inequality, as some evidence suggests at least in the case of the USA (Krueger and Perri, 2006; for a non-technical survey with further citations, see Wilkinson, 2009), this should tend to mitigate the kinds of status competition that Wilkinson and Pickett identify as causes of health and social problems.
- 5 It should be noted that even luck egalitarians are prepared to accept some degree of income inequality (even a very large degree, in fact) if it can be shown to be due to actions that the individual is truly responsible for (e.g., well-informed gambles, starting from a position of equality, may well have different results: the resulting inequality in income would thus be justified).
- 6 In a response to critics of her seminal 1999 article (‘What is the point of equality?’), Anderson notes that ‘although there is a spectacular wealth difference between my family and Bill Gates’ family, my family enjoys such a fully satisfactory level of prosperity that I think only considerations of envy could motivate resentment on my part of Gates’ superior wealth. I see no morally compelling reason to worry about wealth disparities between the prosperous middle class and the super-rich, provided the super-rich don’t use their wealth to undermine democracy – for example, by buying elections – or to oppress other people’ (Anderson, 1999).
- 7 There are some problems with Walzer’s proposals regarding the possibility of what he calls ‘complex equality,’ but discussing them would take us too far afield (Arneson, 1995; Hartogh, 1999; Mayer, 2001; van der Veen, 1999).
- 8 Saunders (2010) notes, rightly in my view, that Japanese society should be more of a puzzle for the Wilkinson and Pickett thesis: this is a society that is highly hierarchical and very status conscious, even though it is income-equal. But if status competition were the key driver of health and social problems in a society, we would expect Japan to have more of such problems. Saunders attributes good health outcomes in Japan to a ‘collectivist’ culture.
- 9 Wilkinson and Pickett often suggest that if we are concerned with inequality, we must give up on economic growth, caricaturing economic growth in advanced societies as if it merely produced environmental wastelands full of unhappy consumerists (e.g., pp.224-33). But economic growth may in fact produce ‘moral’ (Friedman, 2005) and even environmental benefits, and to the extent that there is a trade-off between growth and equality (which is unclear), it needs to be confronted, not assumed to work always in favour of equality.

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