

T.M. Scanlon

WHY DOES INEQUALITY MATTER?
163pp. Oxford University Press. £18.99.
978 0 19 881269 2

“Morality is about what is good for people.” Although that’s a recurring theme in the history of philosophy, our everyday morality contains many elements that don’t obviously chime with it. For one thing, we think that people ought to receive their just deserts – perhaps a mediocre grade or some merited punishment – and this is usually so regardless of whether **it is good for anyone**. It is also widely believed that people deserve equal treatment unless there is reason to treat them differently; but what has this got to do with what is good for people? T. M. Scanlon maintains that things like just deserts and equality matter only in so far as they serve some human interest. In his latest book he sets out to show how equality does indeed bear on what is good for us (or, as he would put it, on what we have reason to want).

The demand for equality is usually presented as a moral demand. People demand equal treatment as a matter of justice and resent it when society permits huge inequalities in, for example, income, education or health care provision without any obvious justification. But on reflection it is unclear why the simple fact that someone else has more money than me should be grounds for resentment. As Steven Pinker recently remarked: “For all the obsession with inequality over the last decade or so, it really is not a fundamental dimension of human well-being. If Bill Gates has a house that is 30 times the size of mine, it doesn’t affect how I live my life”. To put Pinker’s point in Scanlon’s terms: what reason is there to worry about the sheer fact that others have more (or less) than we do?

Suppose for a moment that there *were* something wrong with Pinker’s having a much smaller house than Gates, but that nothing could be done to enlarge Pinker’s house. Still, something can be done to remove the inequality between them, namely by moving Gates into smaller premises. If the inequality between them is indeed wrong then it should make sense to deprive Gates of his mansion just in order to ensure that Gates and Pinker get equal treatment and regardless of whether Pinker or anyone else benefits from that deprivation, regardless of whether it does either him or anyone else any good. Scanlon notes the “apparent irrationality” of such “levelling down” and this leads him to ask “when and why is it morally objectionable that some people are worse off in some way than others are?”.

Scanlon maintains that inequality is objectionable only where there is “some form of relationship or interaction between the unequal parties”. He observes that while the absolutely low level of life expectancy in Malawi is a very bad thing which might well call for remedial action, the purely comparative fact that life expectancy is much lower in Malawi than in the USA lacks “fundamental moral significance”. Scanlon denies that such comparisons are unimportant simply because those involved are citizens of different nation states. But since our interactions with the people of

Malawi are moderately dense, at least within a globalized economy, it is unclear why the comparison between the USA and Malawi is not to the point. To test Scanlon’s hypothesis that inequality is objectionable only where there is some form of relationship or interaction between the unequal parties, we can consider earlier times.

Before the Roman invasion of Britain, the Ancient Romans lived in cities and villas built of stone, served by roads, sophisticated farms and aqueducts, while the Ancient Britons dwelt in villages of mud huts, engaged in subsistence farming and rarely wandered very far. Neither party was – let’s suppose – in dire straits but a believer in equality (an “egalitarian”) might still wonder whether the Romans didn’t have an obligation to even things up once they became aware of the relative deprivation of the Britons. Scanlon would say not, at least so long as the Romans left the Britons alone; this all changes once the Romans chose, for quite other reasons, to cross the Channel. As soon as the Romans and the Britons are part of the same social and economic structure, and if the Romans turn out to benefit from these interactions more than the Britons, the inequality between them becomes an issue.

Scanlon offers us a “moral anatomy of inequality”, listing various things that may be wrong with inequalities that exist between people who share the same social and economic world. These wrongs fall into two broad categories: those based on the bad effects of inequality and those rooted in some unfairness in its causes. As to its effects, inequality can “create humiliating differences in status”, it can “give the rich unacceptable form of power over those who have less”, it can “undermine equality of economic opportunity” and can “undermine the fairness of political institutions”. As to its causes, inequality can “result from the violation of a requirement of equal concern for the interests of those to whom the government is obligated to provide some benefit” or else can “arise from economic institutions that are unfair”.

These considerations are real and important and addressing them seriously would lead us in the direction of a much more equal society. Though Scanlon advances them in the careful and sober language of the incremental reformer, their practical implications are, he suspects, rather radical: the level of inequality they permit “would not be very great: certainly much less than obtained in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, not to mention what we have seen since that time”. Still many egalitarians might wonder whether Scanlon’s list of social and economic vices does indeed exhaust the moral significance of inequality. As Scanlon notes, all of these considerations “presuppose some form of relationship or interaction between the unequal parties” and many egalitarians insist that inequality matters even where no such relationship exists.

Suppose one year (sometime prior to their invasion) the Romans have a bumper harvest and can look forward to a varied selection of delicacies, while the British must endure a tedious diet, though one adequate to support the life of an Ancient Briton. Once the Romans discover this situation, wouldn’t it make sense for their more enlightened thinkers to propose that they surrender at least some of their delicacies in order to make British diet a bit more varied? And might this not make some sense even

though the Roman gourmand’s loss would be no less, and perhaps even a little greater, than the British peasant’s gain, simply to even things up a bit? Here there is a loss of overall utility without pure levelling down, for the Britons gain something from the Romans’ loss.

I’m unsure what Scanlon would say about such much-discussed examples. According to many “prioritarian” philosophers, the Romans should surrender some of their delicacies for the benefit of the British simply because the British have less, the lack of any prior interaction between them notwithstanding. Scanlon mentions prioritarianism only in passing and does not express a view about it. I myself am unsure what to think about such examples, and I trace my uncertainty to puzzlement about another foundational question which Scanlon mentions but does not address.

Scanlon distinguishes the “substantive equality” whose value is the subject of his book from what he calls “basic moral equality” – the idea that everyone counts morally, regardless of differences such as their race, their gender, and where they live”. So, in particular, everyone’s interest or good counts for the same (your health is no more and no less important than mine, for example). As Scanlon observes, the hypothesis of “basic moral equality” at least between human beings is “widely accepted, even among people who reject more substantive egalitarian claims”, and Scanlon himself does not discuss it in detail. But although Scanlon is correct that this hypothesis is widely accepted, there is nonetheless very little agreement over *why* it is true that all human beings have equal moral value. Most ethicists simply assume it to be so, and move on to more substantive questions. Those that choose not to take it for granted produce very different and not always very plausible accounts of human equality.

The issue is indeed a tricky one. We evaluate other people on various dimensions: strength, beauty, intelligence, charm, benevolence, conscientiousness, etc. Human beings vary widely on all of them. Indeed it is hard to think of any important dimension of personal evaluation on which we are all likely to score equally. So why are humans of equal worth, demanding the same level of concern? And why are we all of substantially greater worth than any non-human animal? I raise such intractable questions not to propose an answer but because I wonder whether we can really understand the significance of the “substantive equality” which Scanlon discusses without first getting clearer about the “basic moral equality” that he does not.

Return to the Ancient Romans and pretend for a moment that some among them (the Christians, perhaps) accept the basic moral equality of human beings. Still they might well differ over what makes the Britons (and their interests) no less important than the Romans. One school of thought holds that what distinguishes human beings from the rest of creation is a special capacity for enjoyment, a capacity all human beings share equally, however varied their pleasures. Dealing correctly with other human beings involves showing a proper respect for this special human capacity and showing that respect to the Britons might well require the Romans to surrender some of their delicacies even before they invade just to even up the score, as an acknowledgement that Brit-

ish pleasure matters as much as Roman pleasure.

Another school of thought maintains that what makes human beings stand out from the pack is our capacity to deal fairly with each other, to give proper consideration to each other’s interests whenever we cooperate with them. On that view, provided the Britons are not in need of rescue, the Romans are free to cooperate with them or not as they please; once they choose to interact with the Britons, they are obliged to do so on terms of equality. Before crossing the Channel the Romans can acknowledge the equal worth of the Britons just by leaving them to get on with their perfectly tolerable lives; it is only after their arrival that proper respect requires them to give the Britons a taste of civilized pleasures.

Although Scanlon addresses these foundational issues in other work, here he undertakes the project of grounding the moral significance of substantive equality in less controversial human values without investigating basic human equality. That is the point of his moral anatomy of inequality. I doubt that we can arrive at a final estimate of the success of the present enterprise without asking these broader questions. The mystery of human equality won’t yield to moral anatomy alone.

