

T.M. Scanlon, *Why Does Inequality Matter?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 192 pages. ISBN: 9780198812692. Hardback: £18.99.

In *Why Does Inequality Matter?* T.M. Scanlon sets out to explore objections to inequality. Such objections deal with “when and why [it is] objectionable that some people are worse off in some way than others” (p. 4). Those objections include that inequality is objectionable to the extent that it follows from a violation of a requirement of equal concern by the agent of justice, that it creates humiliating differences in status, that it undermines equality of opportunity by violating the conditions of procedural fairness and/or substantive opportunity, that it undermines the fairness of political institutions, and that it results from unfair economic institutions. Scanlon also discusses arguments drawing on notions of desert, liberty, and property rights, which claim that sometimes people *are* entitled to more than others.

Scanlon labels his approach to inequality “relational” (p. 9; 13) and “pluralistic” (p. 152–154). It is relational because without relational and institutional factors Scanlon holds that it is unclear that inequality is objectionable. It is pluralistic in that it recognizes many different kinds of inequality (e.g. economic, social, gender) which are objectionable for different reasons (if at all). However, Scanlon’s relational view sometimes misses out on the normative significance of certain objections to inequality. Let me illustrate this with two examples. First, climate change leads to objectionable inequalities, which arguably cannot be adequately captured in Scanlon’s relational framework. Such inequalities can arise in contexts which lack a shared relational and/or institutional element. In fact, Scanlon does not discuss climate change at all in this book. However, differences in costs for mediating the effects of climate change and the direct effects of the rise of the sea level are among the driving forces behind some people being worse off than others in our time. Unfortunately, Scanlon’s arguments have little to say about such inequalities. Second, and relatedly, apart from some brief remarks about intergenerational wealth transfers the book does not discuss inequality and future generations. But intergenerational inequality is arguably one of the most important litmus tests for any theory about the desirability and legitimacy of (economic) inequality. Both issues may be a challenge to relational approaches more generally, but it would be fruitful to see how Scanlon’s arguments apply to these topics.

But this worry with Scanlon’s relational view does not negate the fact that the arguments in this book are very much worth paying attention to, and display great depth and expertise. Let me discuss the arguments in turn. Chapter 2 deals with inequality resulting from the failure of an agent (e.g. the

state) to fulfill her obligation to provide benefits to all those to whom it is owed (p. 11). Scanlon points out that this objection is comparative in nature. What matters from the point of inequality is not that the agent fails to provide some goods and services that it has a moral duty to provide, but that it is less or even unresponsive to some groups compared to others in providing these goods and services. And so, equality of concern tracks the reasons or justification for policies rather than their outcomes.

Chapter 3 focuses on status inequality following from evaluative errors about the significance of certain facts about persons, such as their race, skin color, or their economic position. Scanlon points out three separate arguments against status inequality, namely that it deprives some people of important rights and goods, that it deprives all people involved from being able to relate to each other as equals, and that it lets people value or disvalue their lives for reasons that are not good reasons. But objections to status inequality raise the general issue, as Scanlon acknowledges both in this chapter and throughout the book more generally, that societies which value certain talents and skills more than others continuously threaten social status and self-esteem. In other words, equal social status is continuously under threat, and inequality in social status seems almost inevitable. Scanlon's relational and pluralistic take on inequality makes him return to this issue at various occasions, and with much attention to the difficulties it gives rise to.

Chapters 4–5 are among the most insightful chapters of the book. In these chapters, Scanlon assesses the widespread view that “individuals’ chances of economic success should not depend on their family’s economic status” (p. 40), which Scanlon refers to as ‘equality of opportunity’. Scanlon explores to what extent the ideas underlying equality of opportunity are indeed concerns for *equality*. As Scanlon understands it, equality of opportunity entails three things, namely that inequality in economic resources or otherwise is justified if and only if it is justified to have the kind of institutions which generate this sort of inequality (‘Institutional Justification’), the process through which the inequality came about was procedurally fair (‘Procedural Fairness’), and the fact that the person who is disadvantaged compared to others because of the unequal outcome does not result from the fact that she would have been in a better position if no wrong was done to her (‘Substantive Fairness’) (p. 41).

Chapter 6 deals with the question whether economic inequality leads to unfair political institutions. Scanlon's main argument is that equal opportunity for access to the means of political influence is more important, and indeed more convincing, than equality in outcomes. This is because equal opportunity for access to the means of influence is the best way to ensure that officials do

not adopt policies which fail to weigh the interests of all citizens equally. The discussion of political fairness in this chapter is insightful, but unfortunately lacks a discussion of the value of democracy more generally. This is a problem because depending on why one values democracy the question what's wrong with inequality gets a different answer. For example, proceduralists may argue that inequality leads to unfair procedures, whereas instrumentalists could hold that inequality leads to unfairness in outcomes. Because Scanlon does not discuss that literature, it remains unclear to what extent his arguments are compatible with more substantive accounts of the value and authority of democracy.

Chapter 7 deals with libertarian objections to reducing inequality. In this chapter, Scanlon argues against philosophers such as Nozick and Hayek, who render reducing inequality morally objectionable because the pursuit of equality interferes with individual liberty or self-ownership. But Scanlon is keen to argue that in their more attractive formulations such arguments have no implication for taxation. He argues furthermore that promoting equality via equalizing pretax incomes through reshaping institutions of property and exchange is arguably less intrusive in terms of liberty and coercion than redistribution via taxation. For those unfamiliar with the literature on this topic there will be many interesting ideas in this chapter, but for the informed reader this chapter does not contain many new insights.

Chapter 8 and 9 are about desert and unequal income. Sometimes inequality between people is purportedly justified on the grounds that some deserve to have more than others, for example because of what they are like or what they have done. Though desert could be a ground for inequality, Scanlon argues, moral merit, effort, ability and contribution cannot justify differences in *economic* reward. The gist of his argument is that almost all desert claims are made in the context of institutions, and that it is only within those institutional contexts that desert claims are valid. But that only goes for institutional desert claims and not for moral desert claims. When it comes to desert claims within institutions, Scanlon rejects that "these claims are based on a distinctive moral idea of desert" (p. 131). The scope of genuine moral desert claims, then, is rather limited, and in any case does not justify inequalities in economic reward.

In Chapter 9, Scanlon argues that the only justifiable inequalities in income are inequalities which result from necessary features of an economic system that benefits all, or which are the inevitable consequences from individual expressions of liberty (p. 151). In this chapter many of the arguments in this book come together. As Scanlon stresses throughout the book, when it comes to income inequality it is not the inequality that matters, but the underlying relational and institutional aspects that give rise to it.

This book's lengthy discussion of when and why inequality is morally objectionable expertly combines accessibility, subtlety, and sophistication. I only wished there was a final chapter on intergenerational justice and climate change. But apart from that, the book is clearly written, discusses many arguments in both public debate and academic literature, and develops and assesses various ways in which such arguments can be developed. The main strength of this book is not its novelty, since many arguments can be found in Scanlon's earlier work as well, but the way it summarizes and collects arguments against inequality and presents them in an accessible style. This book is a must read for anyone interested in inequality and social justice.

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