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TOO MUCH INEQUALITY*

By Richard W. Miller

I. Introduction

It used to seem so simple. In the old days (the seventies and eighties of the last century), most political philosophers who were inclined to call themselves "egalitarian" thought that one or another version of this argument established at least the approximate truth about economic justice:

I. (Basic Equality) To avoid wrongdoing, one must choose in a way that could express appreciation of the equal worth of all persons.

II. (Economic Equality) For one's political choices to express appreciation of the equal worth of all, one must support economic arrangements that provide all of one's fellow citizens with equal means, of an appropriate kind, to pursue well-being, unless there is a legitimate excuse not to do so based on one of these considerations:
   a. The need to respect the equal civil and political liberties of all, even if this entails economic inequality; or
   b. The fact that an economic inequality is an unavoidable side effect of an arrangement that is best for the worst off

III. (Neutrality) Political choices expressing appreciation of the equal worth of all must not discriminate among ways of life as more or less worth pursuing, except on the independent and prior ground that they are more or less compatible with a political outlook of appreciation of everyone's equal worth.

In order to respect Neutrality, the argument continued, the relevant measure of equality of economic means must be equality of all-purpose means, useful in pursuing all personal goals that depend on economic success. In a modern economy, such equality will consist of equal access to income and wealth.

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> Conclusion: it is wrong to support arrangements that do not provide equal access to income and wealth unless they are justified by at least one of the two excuses for inequality, IIa and IIb.

There were many variants of this argument, including diverse interpretations and modifications of the conclusion. Above all, there were heated disagreements within the egalitarian family over what type of equality to invest with ultimate authority in light of the need to respect Neutrality. Still, under the influence of some version of this argument, most egalitarians shared the practical political conclusion of John Rawls, the great pioneer of modern liberal egalitarianism: given "the constraints of simplicity and availability of information to which any practicable political conception . . . is subject,"[1] citizens should condemn large differences in income and wealth among typical occupants of different social positions as unjust, unless they are justified by IIa or IIb. The goal of economic justice asserted in this claim is what I will mean by "equality of income and wealth," making it a label for what has united self-described egalitarians and provoked their opponents.

After briefly sketching some reasons to abandon the old argument, because of weaknesses in the premises of Economic Equality and Neutrality, I will assess the moral importance of equality of income and wealth in the more complex reasoning that is the natural successor to the old argument if those challenges succeed. In working out the economic implications of Basic Equality, the surviving premise, this fragmented successor responds to diverse specific features of modern social relationships, rather than relying on the generic stance of Economic Equality, and evaluates different kinds of lives in ways that Neutrality prohibited.

II. The Fragmentation of Equality

In controversies over the old argument, the first premise, Basic Equality, which identifies moral duty with choosing so as to express appreciation of the equal worth of all, has certainly retained its force. My statement, in terms of equal worth, is just one of a variety of equivalent formulations that are now confidently deployed. Rather than signaling troubling ambiguities, this diversity adds to the power of this moral egalitarianism. In a particular context, one formulation's dictates may be clearer than others', so the relationship between alternative formulations is one of mutual aid. Some useful alternatives to my formulation in terms of equal worth speak of respect for persons, self-respect, or mutual justifiability. More

[1] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 182 (clarifying the egalitarianism of his seminal book, John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971]).

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specifically, the commitment to choose in a way that expresses appreciation of the equal worth of all persons is, equivalently, the commitment:

> —to choose in ways that express full and equal respect for all persons;
> —to govern oneself by rules that everyone could self-respectfully embrace as a shared moral code;
> —to govern oneself on terms that everyone could share without anyone's having reasons to prefer general regulation by a different moral code that are more serious than anyone's reasons to object to the replacement.[2]

The single outlook that is expressed in these different dicta is often summed up as being a perspective of equal respect. In insisting on this perspective, the old argument that justice demands equality of income and wealth (with provisos IIa and IIb) was off to a good start. But confidence in the argument as a whole has dramatically weakened, for the bright endurance of Basic Equality has been shadowed by grave doubts about the other premises, Economic Equality and Neutrality.

The claim that in all relationships, appreciation of the equal worth of all must be expressed by promoting an equal distribution of the means to pursue well-being would be farfetched even if provisos about basic liberties and about the worst off analogous to IIa and IIb were imposed. Surely, I can regard the girl across the street as worth no less than my daughter without doing at all as much to advance that girl's economic future, even if her own parents can do very little. I must have equal respect for her, but I need not (indeed, I should not) have equal concern for her. I have no less respect for my fellow humans in Mali than for my fellow citizens of the United States, but my political choices need not express as much concern for the poor of Mali as they must for the poor of the South Bronx. But if equal respect does not in general require the promotion of equal means to well-being, it is hard to see what special feature of fellow-citizenship supports the demand of Economic Equality, that is, the commitment to favor laws forcing fellow citizens to provide one another with equal economic means. There is a growing fear among us egalitarians that no feature of fellow-citizenship is strong and broad enough to bear this weight.

[2] This last formulation summarizes Thomas Scanlon's current explication of his proposal that acts are wrong if they violate any system of rules that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for general agreement. See T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), chap. 5. Scanlon emphasizes the diversity of the connections between his underlying moral perspective and the condemnation of economic inequality in his Lindley Lecture, published as T. M. Scanlon, *The Diversity of Objections to Inequality* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1996). Most of the concerns about excessive inequality that I will defend fall within the categories of his insightful taxonomy of these objections.

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The further premise, Neutrality, promised to simplify the egalitarian project, unifying the currency of economic equality into . . . currency. But the simplicity gained by associating economic equality with equal access to income and wealth seems to be accompanied by terrible costs of neutrality for the project as a whole. A central philosophical task of egalitarianism is to justify taxing some to help others. Given their interpretations of the dictates of equal respect, which assign overriding importance to civil liberties, egalitarians must sharply distinguish the anguished protests of a billionaire who cannot afford a fourth summerhouse because of taxes for public education from the protests of someone forced to donate a kidney to save a victim of renal failure or forced to conceal the practice of a religion that disturbs others' sensibilities. How can this be done without insisting on the special role, in a good life, of control over one's body and unconstrained expression of one's religion or irreligion, and on the greater importance of education than summerhouse collecting? No doubt, the billionaire's protest, while self-assertive, is not an expression of self-respect. Indeed, it is self-degrading. But this judgment indicates an evaluative aspect of Basic Equality itself, a rating of life goals that partly determines what counts as respect for persons. No "thin theory of the good" attending to income and wealth because they are all-purpose resources would emerge from this perspective of equal respect.[3]

There are important current attempts to meet all of these challenges. The old argument is wounded, not dead. Still, its prospects are sufficiently troubled that egalitarians would do well to investigate the fate of the old conclusions in the fragmented view of economic justice that would replace it. If our political duties of concern for the economic situations of our fellow citizens respond piecemeal to the variety of relationships that bind us, and are not molded by the generic demand of Economic Equality, what duties to promote economic equality survive? If Neutrality is abandoned, so that money, the all-purpose resource in modern economic life, has no special standing among politically relevant features of economic well-being, what role should equality of income or wealth play in implementing the surviving duties to promote economic equality?

My argument will be that the fragmented view justifies broadly egalitarian concerns: the appropriate response to the various relationships that bind fellow citizens in a modern society includes a commitment to support the use of laws to reduce certain economic inequalities on the

[3] Of course, rankings of ways of life can be relevant to just political choice in some ways and irrelevant in others. Even if respect for persons requires discounting the complaints of the selfish billionaire when choosing how much to tax him to help others, the judgment that his attitude is self-degrading need not justify government efforts to improve it. Normally, an attempt to use force to change someone's self-degradation both fails to express respect and fails to make his life better. In Richard W. Miller, "Liberalism and Equality" (forthcoming), I argue, on these and other grounds, that a non-Neutralist understanding of respect for persons is the best basis for civil liberties and civic tolerance as well as for greater economic equality.

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ground that the differences are too great and not just on the ground that noncomparative deprivations, such as hunger, sickness, or fatigue, ought to be relieved, the more urgently the greater the deprivation. More specifically, the fragmented view provides a basis on which we should sometimes condemn as too great at least three kinds of economic inequalities: inequalities in economic opportunities, in the economic benefits and burdens of government activity, and in the economic bases of social recognition (for example, routine recognition as a reliable participant in shared social activities).

However, other, stronger forms of egalitarianism are not justifiable in this framework. There is no duty, not even a prima facie duty, to promote an equal division of economic goods or opportunities among one's fellow citizens regardless of what social processes have caused the current differences. Moreover, although specific social processes that are an inevitable feature of modern fellow-citizenship do generate reasons to be concerned about specific kinds of consequent inequalities, they also generate serious reasons to be concerned about the costs to the better off of governmental efforts to provide more for those who have less. There is no basis in the structure of modern societies for a provisional assumption that a gain for the economically worst off is more important than its cost to others; hence, there is no basis for a prima facie duty to reduce the scale of the relevant inequality so long as this benefits the worst off.

None of the broadly egalitarian concerns that fellow citizens owe to one another is primarily a concern to avoid differences in income or wealth. So the question of the importance of these differences has to be faced once Neutrality is abandoned. Here, I will argue that attention to inequalities of income and wealth is centrally important as a device by which morally responsible citizens can monitor commitments to eliminate excessive inequalities that are not, in themselves, matters of income or wealth. It is morally misguided and politically self-defeating to insist that justice requires arrangements in which the income and wealth (or opportunities for, or lifetime expectations of, income and wealth) of those with the least should be as great as possible. But sharp increases in inequality of income or wealth are a sign of danger that the primary inequalities have become excessive, and a political community embarked on a project of eliminating these excessive inequalities ought to treat the reduction of income and wealth inequalities as the feasible and timely indicators of progress. As a case study of deliberations based on the more fragmented view of equality, I will sketch reasons to condemn current inequalities in the United States on all the primary dimensions as too great, and reasons to monitor progress in curing these moral diseases by looking at success in reversing recent increases in inequality of income and wealth.[4]

[4] For reasons of space, I will confine my discussion of broad egalitarianism to mutual political obligations among fellow citizens. But I do not mean to suggest that political duties

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III. Equal Opportunity

The most popular political goal intrinsically concerned with equality is equality of opportunity. The complexity of determining when opportunities are too unequal is a useful paradigm of the complexity of reasoning about economic justice in the more fragmented view. It provides striking illustrations of how the force of egalitarian considerations depends on specific aspects of the interactions among those who are unequal, of the pervasiveness of countervailing reasons not to equalize too much, and of the diverse but limited roles of income and wealth in implementing political choices that justly respond to the reasons for and against greater equality.

A. Unequal life prospects and civic respect

In defending broad egalitarianism concerning opportunity, I will identify people's opportunities with their life prospects, that is, their chances of success in attaining economic bases for well-being in their lives as a whole, given their willingness to strive. Conditionality on willingness to strive is crucial, since if a lack of success is entirely due to the subject's choices, there is no denial of opportunity, indeed, no complaint against fellow citizens—although they might have compelling reasons to help on other grounds. No doubt, this conception of opportunity might be refined—for example, by counting it as a loss of opportunity when distorting psychological effects of unchosen circumstances make someone unwilling to make efforts that would in fact be a rational means of striving for a better life. Still, the reduction of excessive inequalities of life prospects captures a great deal of what self-described partisans of equal opportunity pursue.

Concern for burdensome inferiorities in life prospects need not be egalitarian; it can be concern for the burdens, but not for the inferiority in prospects as such. For example, people with severe ill health find economic self-advancement hard where others find it easy, and we should be concerned to help them in their difficulties, but this is typically a concern

to reduce economic inequality extend only to fellow citizens. My rationales for these duties would, in the main, support similar concern for long-term, committed residents of one's country who are not citizens. They will *not* entail the same obligations to the foreign poor, even those living in countries much poorer than one's own, since one does not impose laws on them, rely on their civic loyalty, or share their civic life. Analogous rationales could support duties of political concern for the economic inferiority of the foreign poor, but these duties would be of lesser degree and would be largely overridden by the primary concerns of domestic equality. I try to show that a perspective of equal respect for everyone everywhere requires this priority for compatriots in Richard W. Miller, "Cosmopolitan Respect and Patriotic Concern," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 27, no. 3 (1998): 202–24; and describe the analogous though less demanding reasons for concern for foreign needs in Richard W. Miller, "Moral Closeness and World Community," in Deen Chatterjee, ed., *The Ethics of Assistance* (forthcoming).

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about their afflictions, not about the gap between their prospects and those of the unafflicted. However, from the perspective of Basic Equality in its various formulations, matters are very different for those engaged in the creation of coercively enforced rules that generate differences in life prospects.

It is hard to show respect for others while taking part in a coercive project in which rules are imposed on them. Yet in their political choices, citizens of a democracy do just that. Majority rule is not enough to justify coercive imposition, as witness the injustice of religious persecution supported by a majority. Rather, a just citizen must make political choices that express an appreciation of the equal worth of all. And someone with this attitude must take it as a reason to change a set of laws that those laws give rise to unequal prospects of well-being through circumstances beyond the control of those affected. After all, self-respecting disadvantaged citizens who are aware that their fellow citizens do not regard the production of their (the disadvantaged citizens') inferior circumstances as a reason for change cannot fully commit themselves actively to uphold the laws that have burdened them—and a respectful citizen must strive in her political choices to provide a basis for such self-respectful loyalty. In contrast, it is self-respectful to uphold political arrangements that are not responsive to all brute differences in luck, so long as these arrangements include feasible aid when one has fallen below an appropriate threshold of adequacy and lacks self-reliant means to rise above it. If one's brute bad luck is not due to the dominant laws and policies, loyal support for the laws that dominate one's life does not mean support of what has *made* one's life worse than others'. Of course, people will still regard their brute bad luck as unfair, but this is a complaint against their luck, not a complaint against their fellow citizens.

The coercive enforcement of capitalist rules of self-advancement does inevitably give rise to inequalities in life prospects. Inevitably, some get further ahead than others; because of the consequent inequalities in resources for getting ahead, descendants of those who fall behind have a smaller chance of achieving a fulfilling life. So, in capitalist societies (and other sorts of societies, too, for analogous reasons), differences in life prospects can have the social basis that generates morally and politically relevant complaints.[5]

Of course, if those who complain of disadvantage were thwarted in aspirations that no morally responsible person should have in the first

[5] I will restrict my investigations of broad egalitarianism to capitalist economies, on the assumption that in the setting of modern technology some form of capitalism is morally desirable in light of the failings of the best noncapitalist alternatives. Still, the arguments for broad egalitarianism could be extended, in more or less obvious ways, to any economy in which most economic relationships are based on politically enforced entitlements, family life transfers economic advantages from one generation to the next, and governmental activity plays an indispensable role in economic prosperity.

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place (say, aspirations to raid and pillage), or were asking for a political remedy that is by its nature illegitimate, they would lack a politically relevant reason to object to their situation. But the relevant complaints of unequal opportunity are complaints about having fewer resources for getting ahead by perfectly legitimate means. And the relevant political remedy is a less disadvantageous arrangement, with increased taxes for some and increased help for others, based on laws that are democratically arrived at in deliberations meant to take account of everyone's interests, deliberations giving special weight to the secure enjoyment of fruits of past legal self-advancement. The only basis for peremptorily dismissing such a political remedy would be the familiar libertarian view that all interference with the full benefits of unrestricted capitalist self-advancement is wrong. And such rigid and comprehensive opposition to coercive intrusion on laissez-faire entitlements is not the proper outcome of the perspective of equal respect that I have described. Suppose that I see someone drowning and spot a nearby life preserver ornamenting the flagpole in front of a seaside mansion. If, as I am about to throw the life preserver to the person sinking beneath the waves, its silly, selfish owner rushes out of the mansion and snatches his property away, I do not fail to show appreciation of the equal worth of all if I gently wrest back the life preserver to save the person who is drowning. If someone complains of socially created inferiority in means to legitimate self-advancement and looks to a democratic government for remedies compatible with the rule of law, his complaint deserves standing in further deliberations.

I have not claimed that the engendering of unequal life prospects by capitalist economic activity is a conclusive reason for changing laws, or that it is a conclusive reason so long as the change improves the life prospects of those whose prospects are worst. As we shall see, the circumstances of self-advancement under capitalism also generate reasons *not* to engage in political projects reducing inequalities in life prospects. When the reasons not to reduce an inequality are no less serious than the reasons to reduce it, the inequality is not excessive: one has no duty to promote greater equality even if this would benefit the worst off. Moreover, the morally serious reasons to protest the burdens of policies that reduce inequalities of life prospects reflect enduring, pervasive features of capitalist self-advancement, not just occasional social circumstances or especially costly egalitarian projects. So it would be morally misguided to approach political choice with a standing disposition to use state power to reduce these inequalities, tempered by alertness to signs that this norm is not appropriate due to special circumstances. Even if there is a prima facie political duty of compassion to relieve grave deprivations among fellow citizens who would otherwise suffer greatly, there is no prima facie duty of justice to reduce inequalities in life prospects.

What broad egalitarianism concerning life prospects *does* entail is that the effectiveness of a policy in reducing inequality of life prospects some-

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times functions as an independent ingredient in a case for the policy, which would not be justified in the absence of this reason. A consideration that should not be elevated to a prima facie duty can still be a reason that lends some support to the judgment that one ought to engage in a certain course of conduct, support that is sometimes decisive.

That inequality in life prospects as such can play a decisive role is especially clear when someone's life is not bad, even though it reflects life prospects that are worse than others'. When someone recently repaired my telephone, I felt less uncomfortable than usual when he asked me what I do, and I told him, straightforwardly. "That's just what I wanted to do," he said. "But people in my part of Brooklyn didn't go on to college." The life of a telephone repairman is not severely deprived—in general, or, so far as I could tell, in his case. In asking people in better-off school districts to support aid for poor school districts that will cost them higher taxes and afford their own children more intense competition, it would be far-fetched to urge that they should do this to save other people's children from repairing telephones when another job would be more fulfilling. Unlike the situation of schoolchildren who are apt, because of virtual illiteracy, to endure a life of drudgery interspersed with long spells of unemployment, the situation of children whose prospect is work that is only mildly interesting and fairly independent does not, in itself, merit remedy through compulsory sacrifices of fellow citizens. In contrast, those who seek shifts in public resources toward worse-off school districts can plausibly appeal to a goal of reducing the extent to which differences in social advantages make a fulfilling work life less likely for some than for others. The broad egalitarian thinks that such appeals are sometimes an essential part of an adequate justification of a social policy with significant costs, even though she takes these costs to be relevant and, sometimes, prohibitive.

This willingness to impose costs in order to reduce inferiority is essential to an egalitarianism worthy of the name. Mere support for costless benefits to the worst off is quite inadequate. Anyone but a misanthrope supports costless improvements in people's lives—in the lives of the disadvantaged, and in the lives of the privileged as well.

B. Excessive equalizing

I have been arguing that equal respect for all makes socially created unequal opportunities among one's fellow citizens a cause for concern, while warning that equal respect does not entail a political commitment to minimize the burdens of those inequalities. Now it is time to survey the antiegalitarian considerations standing behind the warning—the diverse and pervasive costs of political projects aimed at reducing inequality of opportunity, costs that can constitute compelling reasons why it would be

wrong to support feasible means of further improvement in the life prospects of the worst off.

One danger of going too far in reducing inequality of opportunity is that of excessive interference with legitimate plans. Usually, people make sacrifices and foreclose options in order to achieve long-term goals. If the goals are worthwhile and the past choices were legitimate, then people have a reason—which is not to say a conclusive reason—to complain of an imposed change that deprives past choices of some of their point and motivating value. After all, life would dissolve into anxious reactivity if one's projects could always be rendered pointless, retroactively, in order to relieve the burdens of those who are less advantaged. The motivating goals of those who benefit from or create unequal opportunity are, most centrally, stable achievements pursued for long-term effects: for example, they strive for a large, attractive house in a pretty neighborhood that they can live in until retirement, not just a nice current experience of housing, and for the means to help their children to prosper, not just a good current family experience. So higher taxes providing others' children with more equal life prospects can become a cause for serious complaint if those taxes significantly interfere with legitimate projects in which the better off invested their hopes and energies.

Other constraints on the reduction of inequality in life prospects involve burdens of disadvantage that egalitarians sometimes neglect, at great political peril, through single-minded attention to the worst off. For one thing, society is not divided into one group, the most disadvantaged, and another, the homogeneously advantaged better off. Plenty of people have life prospects that are lower than some fellow citizens', higher than others'. Even if those who are better off than the median have no reason to complain that their need for better prospects is being neglected, there are plenty of relevantly inferior situations in the first fifty percentiles. These situations are not all tightly "chain-connected," in Rawls's evocative phrase, rising or falling together. What helps the children of parents who have great difficulty finding and keeping even unskilled jobs may not help the children of semiskilled blue-collar workers or stably employed unskilled workers—these workers, for instance, may face wage cuts and increased unemployment under otherwise attractive proposals to help the worst off.

Even though the worst off suffer the most serious deprivations, many others have serious unmet needs affecting their whole lives. Policies of aid do not express an equal valuing of everyone's life and cannot be accepted self-respectfully by all if these policies totally neglect the less serious needs of some, which are serious nonetheless, whenever this is necessary to improve the prospects of the neediest. Such a bias is as one-sided as the policy of a hospital emergency room in which nothing is done to save anyone from blindness or the loss of limbs so long as effort can be diverted to a project of saving someone from death.

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In addition, there is no way in which the costs of improving the prospects of those whose prospects are worse can be confined to those whose *prospects* are better. Governments tax incomes and purchases, which are outcomes. They must ask people who have already achieved various degrees of success to bear sacrifices, through taxes and in other ways, in order to equalize opportunities. In imposing these sacrifices, governments ought to be sensitive to current differences in resources, but they should not grade people for sacrifice-worthiness on the basis of inquiries into whether their current resources reflect past advantages, as against the overcoming of past disadvantages. Inevitably, such inquiries would be demeaningly intrusive and arrogantly speculative. Yet clearly, in any capitalist society, many of those who are well-enough off to be called on to make sacrifices in any extensive effort to reduce inequalities in life prospects *were* burdened by these inequalities and overcame the burdens. If we all were fully aware of the facts of inequality, these overcomers would have reason to complain that their burden of inferior opportunity has been made more severe in order to reduce the burdensomeness of inferior opportunity for others, including others whose life prospects are no worse than the ones the overcomers faced. So the reduction of unequal opportunity by political means ought to be inhibited by awareness that it will impose further costs on some of the victims of unequal opportunity. Of course, in reality, few have adequate self-knowledge in these matters, and many deceive themselves as to barriers overcome. But the same can be said of those who think that their failure to succeed is due to their inferior life prospects.

Another cluster of antiegalitarian considerations involves valuable aspirations, affecting the quality of a person's life, that generate or sustain inequality in life prospects. It is a testimony to the power of these considerations that they can serve as reasons why the most disadvantaged themselves might reject projects maximizing their own income or other material resources. However, these quality-of-life considerations are genuinely antiegalitarian, since they could also exclude equalizing projects that the worst off might prefer on account of extreme material deprivation.

One such quality-of-life consideration concerns the start of life. An appropriate valuing of parental nurturance entails respect for the privacy of home-life and enduring family ties, which together insure the transmission of skills and attitudes within families, even when family differences reflect past differences in success and tend to create differences in life prospects. Given the premise of Neutrality, respect for the family seemed to be a mere means to enhance the provision of all-purpose goods. Freed from this premise, morally responsible citizens can acknowledge that the inhibition of parental nurturance is itself a reason that can count against a policy. Even if the Indian Schools of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs had done their job, affording children taken from their parents a better prospect of economic success, the students and their

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parents would still have had reason to complain of the disruption of their lives together. Where there is a national health service, there is often a plausible case for requiring doctors and hospitals to provide their care as part of it so that the service can play its proper role in reducing inequalities in life prospects. But there is no plausible justification for requiring children to be brought up in state nurseries in order to reduce inequalities in life prospects.

Other aspirations whose value constrains equalization affect later stages in life, when people are expected to be self-reliant. In interactions among interdependent adult nonintimates, life goes better if one receives benefits from others for providing what they want, so that one interacts on a basis of voluntary reciprocity. In addition, most people (including most of the worst off) want to use what resources they have actively, to get ahead on their own steam, and this reflects a proper valuing of human capacities. This preference for self-reliant reciprocity is a desperate and touching concern of the women in Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein's powerful sociological study *Making Ends Meet*,[6] who went off welfare once their children passed infancy, even though their wages did not cover their increased expenses. "The worst part [of working]," one of them succinctly notes, "is that you are no better off as far as your financial situation. . . . The good part about working is that it makes you feel good to have a job. You don't get much, but then, I have a job."[7]

The valuing of self-reliant reciprocity sets limits to the rectification of unequal life prospects through transfers from the better off to the worst-off adults who are capable of self-reliance. In a capitalist economy, getting ahead by offering nonintimates what they want usually means getting wages and working conditions in response to one's actual skills. So transfers that compensate for the absence of well-rewarded skills due to inferior life prospects risk infantilization, unless they save people from severe deprivation—for example, from a life in which the cost of self-reliance is domination by a struggle merely to survive with minimal dignity and to fulfill basic responsibilities to dependents. By the same token, someone has reason to complain if subsidies to others to compensate for inferior life prospects make it harder for him to get ahead self-reliantly (perhaps because of effects of taxation, or perhaps because the subsidies to those whose prospects are worse make them more effective competitors for scarce jobs). Such a complaint of inhibition is not a conclusive reason, but it is a serious reason that is not answered simply by noting the improved prospects of the worst off, or by providing supports and safety nets to those whose self-reliance is undercut, even if these measures make their lifetime incomes as high as they would have been had the original subsidy never been established.

[6] Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein, *Making Ends Meet* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997).

[7] Ibid., 140.

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This is not to say that the value of getting ahead through self-reliant reciprocity is always at odds with demands for greater equality. The differences in economic rewards that lead parents to hope for a white-collar rather than a blue-collar fate for their children, and best of all a professional or managerial fate, are due in part to advantages in bargaining power of those farther up the hierarchy of jobs, not just to the greater value of what they do for the firms that employ them. In addition, returns to wealth need not be proportionate to prior entrepreneurial contribution. Real capitalism, as opposed to the ideal model of the "perfect competitive market" that economic theorists sometimes explore, spontaneously gives rise to situations in which many of the worse off can complain that they are not compensated in proportion to what they self-reliantly contribute while others, who are better off, receive benefits quite out of proportion to their contributions. Still, the proper valuing of self-reliant reciprocity can rule out measures that would provide the most income for the least advantaged. Freed from Neutrality, we need not regard a disinclination to take handouts, even handouts based on legal entitlement, as, at best, a source of useful incentives, at worst, a stultifying inhibition.

Politicians and political philosophers tend to specialize in one or another of the diverse reasons I have mentioned in this survey of reasons relevant to the judgment of unequal life prospects. Each is apt to claim that the most important economic institutions ought, in all important respects, to be molded by his or her favorite consideration—say, by noninterference with benefits of legitimate acts of self-advancement, or by the commitment to remove burdens of inferior life prospects. But why suppose that this sort of simplicity, which would be wildly inappropriate in moral deliberations among family members, friends, or departmental colleagues, should characterize well-conducted deliberations among fellow citizens? In every other situation of ongoing collective deliberation, morally responsible participants give a hearing to highly diverse claims, complaints, and aspirations and try to reach their ultimate conclusions from an authoritative, higher-order perspective of appropriate sensitivity to the seriousness of these diverse competing reasons. This is how they display respect for one another in their deliberations. Even if the deliberative outcome is some relatively simple norm ("Graduate students serve on search committees on these terms," "These parents divide up child care in this way"), it is properly arrived at through informed assessment of the seriousness of many competing considerations, and through ingenuity in mitigating the diverse kinds of losses that accompany the pursuit of legitimate goals.

C. Unequal opportunity in the United States

How might such respectful deliberations proceed among fellow citizens determining whether inequality of life prospects is currently exces-

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sive? In the fragmented view of equality, different situations dictate different deliberative agendas and justify different conclusions. So, here and elsewhere in this essay, I will offer as a case study arguments suggesting that relevant inequalities in the United States today are excessive.

The importance of reasons for changing rules of self-advancement that generate differences in life prospects is proportionate to the importance of those differences for people's lives. For most of us, the most important economic concern is getting and keeping a good job. In ranking jobs, most of us are guided both by monetary considerations and by nonmonetary ones, such as the desire for interesting, independent, clean, and secure work.[8] Monetary and nonmonetary rankings of jobs are well correlated.[9] These rankings create a pecking order of job clusters in which professionals, managers, officials, and nonretail sales workers—"upper white-collar occupations," in the jargon of mobility studies—rank on top, while "lower manual occupations" such as service workers, operatives, and nonfarm laborers, rank together with farmworkers at the bottom. Analyzing U.S. data from 1982–90 concerning men aged 25–64, sociologist Robert Hauser found that 60 percent of upper white-collar fathers had upper white-collar sons, as compared with 27 percent of lower manual fathers. Fourteen percent of upper white-collar fathers had lower manual sons, as compared with 37 percent of lower manual fathers.[10] In an earlier sociological study, Christopher Jencks and his colleagues reported:

> Those who do well economically typically owe almost half of their economic advantage to family background. . . . If . . . an omniscient scientist were to predict the economic standing of sons from different families, he would find sons from the most favored fifth of all families had predicted Duncan scores [a widely used measure of the status of occupations on a scale from 0 to 96] of about 64, while sons of the least favored fifth of all families have predicted scores of about

[8] See Christopher Jencks, Lauri Perman, and Lee Rainwater, "What Is a Good Job?" *American Journal of Sociology* 93, no. 6 (1988): 1322–57. They note, "While earnings are the most important single determinant of a job's desirability, the 13 nonmonetary characteristics [in terms of which desirability was assessed] are twice as important as earnings" (ibid., 1322).

[9] Because of this correlation, the inequality in overall desirability among jobs is much greater than the inequality in earnings. Jencks, Perman, and Rainwater found that inequality in monetary plus nonmonetary characteristics (assessed using the standard deviation when characteristics are measured on logged ratio scales) was 2.8 times greater than inequality in pay alone. See ibid., 1353. This is the opposite of the effect entailed by the familiar neoclassical explanation of wage differences, according to which greater monetary rewards compensate for the greater repulsiveness of the associated work ("Investment banking is ghastly, but someone has to do it").

[10] Table credited to Robert Hauser, in Dennis Gilbert, *The American Class Structure in an Age of Growing Inequality* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1998), 144. Tracing other rates of transition to upper white-collar occupations, Hauser found that 39 percent of lower white-collar fathers (e.g., clerical workers) had upper white-collar sons; for upper manual fathers (e.g., craftsmen and foremen) and fathers who were farmers or farmworkers, the percentages were 32 percent and 19 percent, respectively.

16. This is the difference between a social worker or the manager of a hardware store (both 64) and a construction painter (16), a farmer (14) or an auto mechanic (9).[11]

The evidence of large differences in life prospects for well-paying work is also striking. Comparing ten-year averages of parents' income and of children's earnings, economists Jere Behrman and Paul Taubman found that after they controlled for age, gender, and race, a 10 percent increase in parental income was associated with a 6 percent increase in children's earnings. (The associated increase without these controls was 8 percent.)[12]

Although these figures imply substantial differences in life prospects, they do not entirely reflect differences generated by the rules for self-advancement that citizens have chosen to impose on one another. To some extent, they reflect traits that the more successful parents developed for reasons independent of their own social advantages, traits that would be as valuable under any rules for getting ahead compatible with civil and political liberty, which contribute to parental success, and also, independently of parental success, make people apt to have successful children. The prime example of such morally neutral generation of unequal life prospects would be genetically based and transmitted superiority in the general cognitive abilities that are useful in getting ahead under any defensible rules for self-advancement. Studies of IQ differences are sometimes advanced as supporting the claim that genetically based differences in general cognitive ability have a powerful and pervasive influence on differences in life prospects.[13] But even if interpretations of differences in childhood IQ as measures of genetically based differences in general intelligence were correct, this factor would not dominate the production of unequal life prospects. In their study of economic prospects in the United States, economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis examined the likelihood that white males of average childhood IQ from families in various socioeconomic deciles would eventually enter the top income quintile; 5.5 percent of men from families in the lowest decile rose to the top income quintile, and this percentage rose steadily through the decile ranks, up to 40.8 percent for men from families in the highest decile.[14]

[11] Christopher Jencks et al., *Who Gets Ahead?* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 81 f. In "What Is a Good Job?" 1349, Jencks, Perman, and Rainwater note that the impact of family background on overall job desirability is much greater than its impact on Duncan scores.

[12] Jere R. Behrman and Paul Taubman, "The Intergenerational Correlation between Children's Adult Earnings and their Parents' Income," *Review of Income and Wealth* 36, no. 2 (1990): 115–27.

[13] See, for example, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve* (New York: Free Press, 1993).

[14] See Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 121. The analogous probabilities among all white males are 4.2 percent for those from the lowest decile and 43.9 percent for those from the highest, with the same steady rise in between. In this study, the index of socioeconomic background is based on parents' income, father's years of schooling, and father's occupational status (rated by the

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In any case, there is powerful evidence that IQ differences between people in different social milieus are not, typically, genetically determined or differences in general intelligence. For example, stable gene pools, throughout the world, have sustained large upward changes in IQ scores, such as the steady twenty-one-point increase in average Dutch IQ scores between 1952 and 1982.[15] Ninety percent of Britons born in 1877 would have had scores at or under the fifth percentile of the scores of those born in 1967: by the IQ standards applied to the later generation, the earlier group would have been, at best, at the border of mental retardation.[16] If IQ scores do not remotely reflect differences in general intelligence between people in historically different situations, why suppose they accurately measure such differences between people in socioeconomically different situations?

In addition to their contribution to children's cognitive ability, parents' roles in the development of character traits and styles of conduct also, obviously, have an important bearing on children's ultimate success. Yet the different life prospects that result do not simply reflect differences in parental commitment and nurturant skill that are independent of parents' social situations and that would affect life-starts in any society properly respectful of family life. Lives at different levels of the modern capitalist occupational hierarchy encourage the formation and transmission of different attitudes toward initiative, obedience, predictability, independent judgment, conformity, and empathic understanding.[17] The upper-echelon traits (for example, a relatively self-directed work-style) are, in turn, competitive assets for children to whom they are transmitted, since supervisors and others with an influence on their success take these traits as especially suitable for the best job ladders.[18]

In sum, there is significant evidence that the distribution and importance of every parental trait strongly associated with children's success

standard Duncan scores). These and other aspects of the study's methodology are described in Samuel Bowles and Valerie Nelson, "The 'Inheritance of IQ' and the Intergenerational Transmission of Economic Inequality," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 56, no. 1 (1974): 39–51. For an analysis of more recent data in which social background similarly dominates IQ in the explanation of poverty and household-income inequality, see Claude S. Fischer et al., *Inequality by Design: Cracking the Bell Curve Myth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp. chap. 4.

[15] See James R. Flynn, "Intelligence and Meritocracy," in Kenneth Arrow, Samuel Bowles, and Steven Durlauf, eds., *Meritocracy and Economic Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 36.

[16] Ibid., 40 f.

[17] See Melvin Kohn, *Class and Conformity*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); and Melvin Kohn and Carmi Schooler, "Occupational Experience and Psychological Functioning," in Melvin Kohn and Carmi Schooler, eds., *Work and Personality: An Inquiry into the Impact of Social Stratification* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1983).

[18] See Richard C. Edwards, "Individual Traits and Organizational Incentives: What Makes a 'Good' Worker?" *Journal of Human Resources* 11, no. 1 (1976): 51–68. For analogous observations on styles of presentation (eye contact, ways of walking, etc.), see Troy Duster, "Postindustrialization and Youth Unemployment," in Katherine McFate, Roger Lawson, and William Julius Wilson, eds., *Poverty, Inequality, and the Future of Social Policy* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1995), 461–86.

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are both due, to a substantial extent, to the rules of self-advancement that we impose on one another. Still, it is and will always be impossible definitively to factor out those causes of disadvantage that are legitimate sources of complaint from those that are not. The Great Longitudinal Study that would determine the extent to which unequal parental tendencies to raise successful children are due to social inequalities among parents or parents' ancestors would only be complete when those whose just complaints are vindicated are dead and those alive face structurally different economic demands that render the Great Longitudinal Study obsolete.

In this context of uncertainty, the size of the gross differences in life prospects and the significant evidence that socially enforced rules of self-advancement contribute to them provide those who respect their fellow citizens with a serious reason to reduce inequality. Greater burdens of proof should accompany greater dangers of unjust burden. More specifically, just choice in the face of empirical uncertainty must be guided by this principle: if one alternative would impose more burdensome injustice, if it turned out to be empirically misguided, than a rival alternative would, if *it* turned out to be empirically misguided, we should put a special burden of proof on those asking us to take on the greater moral risk. For example, an empirically misguided high estimate of the extent to which social factors determine skills might support excessive taxation of investment bankers, whereas a similarly misguided high estimate of the extent to which genetic factors determine skills might support deficient public provision of education for the children of telephone repairers. In this context, a substantial yet nonconclusive case that social factors determine skills can provide a serious reason to reduce disadvantage, because the worse off have more at stake.

Current inequalities in life prospects in the United States have turned out to be serious reasons to improve the life prospects of the disadvantaged. Granted, there are also many serious reasons not to engage in equalizing projects, and just political choices must be sensitive to them as well. However, there are plenty of ways in which social policies can adequately accommodate these considerations while pursuing significant reductions in the inequality of opportunity that empirical findings indicate.

One overarching antiegalitarian consideration, as we have seen, is the need to show due respect for the legitimate long-term plans of the better off. When policies are means of improving seriously inferior life prospects, this value is respected by avoiding costs that significantly worsen anyone's life through the thwarting of legitimate projects that invest her life with value. A great many people could be taxed much more without their lives being significantly worsened.

In addition, the concerns of those whose life prospects are neither among the best nor among the worst must be acknowledged. This can be done by instituting a broad array of programs, not solely concerned with

the worst off, that show proportionate sensitivity to different people's different needs.

Also, the concerns of those who have overcome disadvantages must be acknowledged. This can be done by insuring that self-reliant striving is a source of substantial benefit.

Finally, the dangers of infantilization must be recognized. Many projects of heightened equality do avoid these dangers, even when the beneficiaries are not severely deprived. For example, improvement of education for disadvantaged children is central to the pursuit of equal opportunity in part because it provides means of achieving future self-reliance to those who are currently appropriately dependent on others for these means. The public provision of cultural facilities, medical care, and shared amenities such as parks and playgrounds can make differences in economic life prospects smaller by reducing the need to rely on personal funds for the relevant goals without depriving anyone of the virtues of a self-reliant life. Likewise, the strengthening of unions, far from undermining self-reliant reciprocity, can make the labor market a better vehicle for achieving it, by reducing disadvantages in bargaining power that do not reflect the value of workers' services or output.[19]

D. The relevance of money

What does all of this have to do with income and wealth? Differences in income and wealth can figure as evidence that inequalities in life prospects are too great; as causes to be mitigated in order to reduce excessive inequalities in life prospects; and as signs of danger and measures of success, stimulating discussion of whether to reduce inequality in life prospects and helping to monitor egalitarian projects that are adopted. However, it is only in the third context, as signs and measures guiding public deliberation over the ultimate concern for different prospects of economically based well-being, that differences in income and wealth merit central importance.

[19] Because firms in a local labor market are vastly less numerous than their potential employees and typically have substantial reserves, while their prospective blue-collar employees typically lack substantial savings, the firms are in a better position to collaborate (usually tacitly) in resisting increased wages than blue-collar workers are to collaborate in resisting wage decreases in the absence of strong unions. (Adam Smith insists on the special power of this "tacit, but constant and uniform combination [of masters against workmen], not to raise wages," noting, "It is not . . . difficult to foresee which of the two parties must, upon all ordinary occasions, have the advantage in the dispute, and force the other into a compliance with their terms." See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan [New York: Random House, 1937], 67 f.) Because of the different relationships of employment change and of investment change to personal life, "If you don't like it here, try to get a job elsewhere" threatens in a way that "If you don't like the terms on which we offer to work, invest elsewhere" does not. A worker who sincerely insists, with legitimate pride, that she does not want more than her work is worth does not mean that she wants no more than what she would be paid in a market in which employers exploit their bargaining advantages to the hilt, advantages that strong unions can reduce.

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Differences in income and wealth have some evidentiary value in arguments about whether differences in life prospects are excessive. But this evidentiary importance is small. The size of interpersonal differences in income or wealth is a bad measure of the size of differences in well-being, even in well-being that depends on overall economic circumstances. After all, most full professors at leading American universities enjoy about the same level of well-being as Bill Gates, so far as their well-being and Gates's depend on their economic roles and their success in filling them. Also, differences in income and wealth are differences in outcomes, which are, notoriously, compatible with similar or even identical opportunities. Finally, we cannot rely on monetary differences to tell us to what extent differences in life prospects are due to socially imposed rules, or to identify the point at which reasons not to equalize further should take hold.

On the other hand, once we have decided that there is too much inequality in life prospects, inequalities of income and wealth become somewhat more important as causes to be mitigated in the project of reducing the excessive inequality. For example, in the United States today, the cost of college and the impact of a college degree on subsequent economic success are together an important vehicle through which differences in parental income and wealth cause differences in life prospects. In 1995–96, the average annual sum of the tuition and other expenses of a year's full-time attendance at a four-year college ranged from $9,751 at public, non-doctorate-granting institutions to $23,391 at private, doctorate-granting universities.[20] The smaller average price of attendance was 86 percent of the average family income in the lowest fifth of all U.S. families in 1996, 23 percent of the middle fifth's average income, and 8 percent of the highest fifth's average income; for the higher price, the corresponding ratios were 205 percent, 55 percent, and 19 percent.[21] While colleges and governments (federal, state, and local) respond to financial needs with grants, loans, and work-study programs preferentially directed at families with lower incomes, the resulting net price (more properly, net current price, since aid in the form of loans must be repaid) still often imposes a severe financial strain. In 1995–96, for families with income under $20,000, this net price for a child's full-time attendance averaged $4,156 at public, non-doctorate-granting four-year institutions, and $9,652 at private,

[20] See Lutz Berkner and Andrew Malizio, *Student Financing of Undergraduate Education: 1995–96* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1998), 66. These averages are based on the typical student budgets that the colleges use in their financial aid calculations. In addition to tuition and fees, these budget estimates take into account costs of books and supplies and "other living expenses directly related to attendance, such as room and board, transportation, and personal expenses" (ibid., 61).

[21] Data used for these calculations is from U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Income Inequality Tables, Table IE–1, Selected Measures of Household Income Dispersion: 1967 to 1999," available on-line at http://www.census.gov/hhes/income/histinc/ie1.html.

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doctorate-granting universities.[22] The lower average net price was around 36 percent of the average income among all families with income less than $20,000 in 1996, while the higher average net price was around 85 percent of their average income.[23] The respective average net prices were $6,302 and $12,245 for families with incomes between $40,000 and $59,000, the range in which median family income fell, and were $9,326 and $21,335 for families with incomes of $100,000 or more.[24] The special economic strains that families of low income and little or no wealth face in sending a child to college contribute to substantial aptitude-independent differences in enrollment rates. Among 1992 high school graduates who were qualified for college by such standard measures as SAT scores and grades assessed in light of curricular rigor, 52 percent of those from families with incomes under $25,000 had enrolled in a four-year college by 1994, as opposed to 83 percent of those from families with incomes over $75,000.[25] Such differences in prospects of a college degree are important to economic life prospects as a whole. In 1989, among older workers, women who were college graduates earned 70 percent more than women who were just high school graduates; the college premium for men was 65 percent.[26]

Because of the high cost of college as compared with most families' current incomes, access to higher education is sensitive to differences in wealth. When one adds the importance of wealth in buying a home in a good school district, the impact of differences in wealth on differences in life prospects becomes even more significant. And current differences in wealth in the United States are extremely steep. In his study of the American distribution of wealth, economist Edward Wolff reports that in 1992,

[22] See Berkner and Malizio, *Student Financing*, 147.

[23] More precisely, these are percentages of the average income of families in the lowest quintile, which happened to have an upper limit very close to $20,000 (namely, $19,680) in 1996. See U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Income Tables—Families, Table F–1, Income Limits for Each Fifth and Top 5 Percent of Families (All Races): 1947 to 1999," available on-line at http://www.census.gov/hhes/income/histinc/f01.html; and U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Income Tables—Families, Table F–3, Mean Income Received by Each Fifth and Top 5 Percent of Families (All Races): 1966 to 1999," available on-line at http://www.census.gov/hhes/income/histinc/f03.html.

[24] See Berkner and Malizio, *Student Financing*, 147. Median family income was $44,756 in 1996, and $44,527 for families with one or more children under 18. U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Income Tables—Families, Table F–10A, Presence of Children under 18 Years Old by Type of Family—White Families by Median and Mean Income: 1974–1999," available on-line at http://www.census.gov/hhes/income/histinc/f10a.html.

[25] See Susan P. Choy, *College Access and Affordability* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1998), 9. Among 1980 high school graduates, the proportion attending college in 1982 among those in the lowest socioeconomic quartile and second-highest cognitive quartile was smaller than that among those in the highest socioeconomic quartile and lowest cognitive quartile. See Gilbert, *The American Class Structure*, 169.

[26] Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk, *America Unequal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 116 f. Here, "older workers" are those with thirty to thirty-nine years of experience. Among workers with under ten years of experience, the college premium is 54 percent for women and 23 percent for men.

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average financial wealth in the top 1 percent of U.S. households was $7,513,000 (giving them 45.6 percent of total U.S. wealth); the next 19 percent averaged $404,500 (46.7 percent of the total), and the bottom 80 percent averaged $16,000 (7.8 percent of the total). The corresponding figures for net worth, which also includes the value, less debt, of household assets such as a house, a car, or clothes in the closets, are $7,925,000 (37.2 percent), $523,600 (46.6 percent), and $43,300 (16.3 percent).[27]

Still, it is important not to take the undoubted causal impact of wealth differences on life prospects as entailing a centrally important role for reductions in wealth differences in just social policies. Respect for long-term plans and for the achievements of those who have overcome inferior life prospects imposes strict constraints on the reduction of wealth inequalities. Thus, in the project of reducing inequalities in life prospects, the reduction of differences in wealth should observe serious moral limits.

Even apart from their effect on major investments in children's futures—the special province of family wealth—income differences play a causal role in the differentiation of life prospects by giving parents greater resources for helping their children to get ahead once the parents have satisfied more urgent needs and desires. However, because of both causal uncertainty and moral constraints, the reduction of income differences will only play a limited role as an instrument of change in just social policies. The correlation of parental-income differences with other relevant factors (for example, differences in parents' education) makes the independent causal role of income and the causal efficacy of income transfers hard to assess. In any case, the need to avoid both infantilization and imposing excessive costs on those with higher incomes sets limits on the use of direct transfers of income as a cure for excessive inequality in life prospects.

While policies that reduce unequal opportunity should only rely to a small degree on income and wealth differences in their underlying justification, and should only equalize opportunities by reducing income and wealth differences to a limited extent, inequalities of income and wealth come into their own in the *monitoring* of the effort to avoid excessive inequalities of life prospects. They are centrally important as danger signs and as timely indicators of progress.

Increases in inequality of income and wealth are signs of moral danger that properly stimulate public discussion of the need for policies reducing inequality in life prospects. While a substantial increase in inequality of income and wealth is bound to increase inequalities in life prospects, standard antiegalitarian arguments do not apply with their usual force to the extra gains to the better off. Substantial increases in income and wealth inequality mainly derive from extra payoffs for choices made by

[27] Edward N. Wolff, *Top Heavy* (New York: New Press, 1996), 67 f.

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the better off that they would have made, just as rationally, in any case. After all, the better off are not that much better than the rest of us (or the eminent economists among us) at economic fortune-telling. (Characteristic windfalls include stock market booms that increase returns to wealth, greater rewards to careers that the better off are already pursuing, and greater returns to higher education that better-off children would, in any case, acquire.) As a result, standard considerations of respect for planning do not supply reasons for protecting the additional inequalities that are as serious as the reasons not to eliminate inequalities that such considerations otherwise provide. Moreover, it takes a while for the beneficiaries of heightened inequality to make more expensive projects so central to their lives that their frustration would genuinely worsen their lives. (Not being able to maintain a recent increase in one's monthly consumption of luxury items is one thing, not being able to keep up the increased mortgage on a new, nicer house is quite another, even if the differences are the same in monetary terms.) So, for some time after increases in income and wealth inequality, the moral significance of marginal financial costs to the better off is not as great as usual. But there is a corresponding danger that unnecessary moral barriers may eventually arise to responding to others' legitimate interests in improved opportunities.

As usual, the United States currently provides a vivid illustration of morally troubling inequality, for the frequent increases in inequality of income and wealth in the United States in recent decades create a pressing need for timely response. With small fluctuations around a regular trend, the ratio of household income at the 95th percentile to household income at the 20th percentile has risen from 6.31 in 1974 to 8.26 in 1999.[28] From 1979 to 1992, the proportion of total marketable wealth owned by the richest 1 percent of families increased from 22 percent to 42 percent.[29]

[28] See U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Income Inequality Tables, Table IE–1." In this period, there was also a steady increase in inequality of individual earnings among those who work full-time and year-round. For example, the ratio of earnings between the 90th and 10th percentiles increased from 3.84 to 5.33 among men, and from 3.01 to 4.50 among women (U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Income Inequality Tables, Table IE–2, Measures of Individual Earnings Inequality for Full-Time, Year-Round Workers by Sex: 1967 to 1999," available on-line at http://www.census.gov/hhes/income/histinc/ie2.html). So changes in household composition, which in any case reflect such economic factors as long-term unemployment among local men, were far from the whole story of the increase in income inequality among households. Economist Paul Ryscavage and his colleagues estimate that changes in household composition were responsible for 47 percent of the increase in household-income inequality from 1969 to 1989, and for 20 percent of the increase from 1979 to 1989; see Paul Ryscavage et al., *Studies in the Distribution of Income* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 1992), 17–25. These estimates probably overrate the relative impact of changes in household composition, since they depend on Census Bureau tabulations that do not record the very highest incomes, the locus of the greatest individual-income gains.

[29] See Edward N. Wolff, "How the Pie Is Sliced," *American Prospect*, June 23, 1995, available on-line at http://www.americanprospect.com/print/V6/22/wolff-e.html. Marketable wealth consists of net assets minus consumer durables, pensions, and the value of future Social Security benefits. When these assets are included, there was still a substantial increase in the top 1 percent's share; it went from 13 percent in 1976 to 22 percent in 1989 (ibid.).

Even though the prior inequalities, which had persisted for many years, were already great, these more recent increases have deserved attention as important signs of danger.

The reduction of inequality of income and wealth is also centrally important in monitoring the implementation of broadly egalitarian projects. Suppose that we have decided that life prospects are too unequal, and have implemented our first best guesses as to legitimate, effective means of ending the excess. How can we monitor our success or failure? Our aim is to reduce serious inequalities in lifetime probabilities of success that are due to socially imposed rules and not due to differences in willingness to work. But if we wait for an informed analysis of lifetime consequences, any victims of injustice will be dead by the time we get the results. We need reasonably prompt, roughly accurate measures of progress and failure in lifting burdens of excessively unequal life prospects, so that we can take due care to avoid injustice. It is hard to see how we can avoid attending to substantial changes in the distribution of income and wealth, taking greater equality there as a sign of success in our different, ultimate, broadly egalitarian goals.[30]

IV. Impartial Provision

In the hope that the complexities of broadly egalitarian concern for life prospects have illuminated the overall pattern of deliberations in the fragmented view of equality, I will survey the other major aspects of broad egalitarianism more briskly. Each is important, responsive to distinct, complex social processes, and distinctively related to income and wealth.

[30] The distributions of income that can be promptly ascertained are distributions in a given year. So it is important to see whether income mobility makes these time-slices bad indicators of lifetime economic difference and whether upward trends in annual income inequality are mitigated by increases in income mobility. Although in the United States, as in all modern economies, income mobility is significant, it does not make annual income distributions an inappropriate monitor of income inequality in either of these two ways. In the largest, most representative U.S. longitudinal study, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), the ratio of the Gini inequality coefficient for total incomes earned by male heads of household from 1967 to 1975 to the average annual Gini coefficient for income inequality during that time period was .84 for those who were 20 or older in 1967, and rose steadily through age brackets, reaching .97 for those 50 and older. Thus, inequalities of income within year-long periods tended to be a good measure of inequality in long-term income. (See A. B. Atkinson, F. Bourguignon, and C. Morrisson, *Empirical Studies of Earnings Mobility* [Chur, Switzerland: Harwood, 1992], 140. For an explanation of the Gini coefficient, see note 32 below.) In a later analysis of PSID data, it was found that seven-tenths of individuals in 1986 had moved no more than two deciles from their income-decile rank in 1979. In terms of five-year averages centered on those two years, nine-tenths of individuals moved no more than two deciles. In the course of the dramatic increase in income inequality between 1969 and 1986, there was no overall increase in income mobility—that is, none when 1969–76 mobility and 1979–86 mobility are compared. (See Thomas L. Hungerford, "U.S. Income Mobility in the Seventies and Eighties," *Review of Income and Wealth* 39, no. 4 [1993]: 406 f., 409.)

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In addition to attending to inequalities in life prospects, one should condemn economic inequalities when they reflect government policies that do not display equal concern for all citizens. This condemnation is entailed by the requirement of Basic Equality among fellow citizens. I can hardly respect myself if I willingly commit myself to uphold the outcome of political deliberations whose norms do not dictate as much concern for me as for others. And one cannot respect another while coercively imposing a regime on him that he could not self-respectfully uphold.

To strengthen this conclusion, consider some rivals to the precept that equal concern should govern political deliberations among fellow citizens. A politics of equal concern is certainly more respectful of fellow citizens than a political process in which citizens see politics solely as a means of advancing their own interests. After all, a goal appropriate to this civic attitude of self-interest would be participation in an enduring coalition that dominates others' lives, paralyzing opposition through despair or fear.

A more attractive alternative, from the standpoint of equal respect, is commitment to the provision of *equal net benefit* from government policies as a whole. This is a genuine rival to equal concern. For political deliberations seeking laws that are of equal net benefit to all might provide relatively little to the neediest because their abysmal baseline of neediness makes improvement so much easier, or because others gain little on balance from projects helping the neediest, who may on average be less productive than others. Why not let this familiar standard of fairness determine the requirements of equal respect in political choice?

Equal concern is the more appropriate standard because it better reflects the moral significance of democratic citizenship. For equal concern, not concern for equal benefit, expresses the proper valuing of the institutional loyalties on which a well-ordered democracy depends. Morally responsible citizens of a just polity want its functioning to depend on willing civic commitments—for example, a preference for principled persuasion and empathic consideration of others' conflicting interests even when one could be part of a dominant coalition; a willingness to conform to laws with which one disagrees, even if they are somewhat unjust or quite foolish; and, if need be, a willingness to risk one's life for one's country. A proper appreciation of these shared institutional loyalties is displayed in equal concern for one's loyal coparticipants. Someone who properly values friendship does not abandon a friend when it turns out that the friend cannot match her benefit for benefit because of circumstances beyond his control. Similarly, the appreciation of another's loyal fellow-citizenship ought to be expressed in concern for her, not just for the fair exchange of the payoffs of association with her.

The civic duty that I have tried to establish, the duty to seek government policies displaying equal concern, creates pressure to reduce economic inequality, because there is a special connection between equal concern and attention to relative need. At the same time, other aspects of

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the precept of equal concern, limiting the scope of such concern and requiring attention to the weight of numbers, can impose moral limits on projects of equalization, limits to which a broad egalitarianism also attends.

Equal concern requires proportionate responsiveness to interpersonal differences in needs of relevant kinds. Equal concern for one's children provides familiar examples. A parent who has equal concern for both his young children will do more to obtain health care for the one with more serious health problems, and will provide more nurturance for the one who needs more in order to become a secure, self-confident, self-reliant person. Despite all of the differences between parenthood and fellow-citizenship, equal concern among fellow citizens should also be guided by proportionate responsiveness to relevant needs. For example, once the U.S. government embarked on the interstate highway program, the equal concern entailed by equal respect among fellow citizens required special sensitivity to the needs of areas that would otherwise have been isolated. Perhaps the interstate highway system has done more to benefit people in the Southwest than it has for those in the Northeast, whose transportation needs were reasonably well served to begin with. This is no criticism of the system, which ought to have been especially sensitive to access-deprivation.

Because concern for someone requires sensitivity to her needs, it might seem that the requirement of equal concern will rule out large inequalities in well-being. But this quick inference would neglect the connection of equal political concern with the specific topic of a political choice, as well as the appropriate role of numbers.

That we should display equal concern in providing a good politically does not entail that we should be concerned to use government to satisfy every need that would otherwise go unmet. The proper scope of political concern has to be established. No doubt, everyone's having virtually anything depends on the existence of government. But this does not entail that virtually everything must be treated as a good that government provides. If otherwise independent Celtic tribes on the ancient North Sea coast discovered that they could only save their fields by collectively constructing and manning dikes, they would be obliged not to discriminate in the provision of flood-protection, but they would hardly have to convert their fields into a collective asset for all. By the same token, to display equal concern when providing a good by governmental means requires appropriate sensitivity to the need that is served by that project, not to citizens' neediness in general. The better off should not receive less police protection because a few robberies will still leave them better off than poor people.

The quick inference from equal political concern to the exclusion of large inequalities in well-being also neglects the role of numbers in equal concern, which can diminish pressure to put those who need most first when there are many more with significant, less serious, competing needs. To adapt the sort of example that leads even Thomas Scanlon, one of the

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foremost contemporary critics of utilitarianism, to concede that numbers seem to matter in the final analysis: A lifeguard must show equal concern for everyone in danger when choosing whom to save. So, if she must choose between saving someone from being blinded for life by a school of jellyfish and saving someone from drowning, she must favor the one whose very life is in peril, the individual with the more serious need. But suppose that the lifeguard must choose between saving one person from drowning and rushing to a public-address system to warn people at a crowded beach to avoid an approaching school of jellyfish that will otherwise blind thousands. In this case, equal concern for all hardly prohibits the lifeguard from saving the greater number from the lesser danger, which is still relevantly serious.[31] Crass as politicians' appeals to the Great Middle Class can be, this vast majority can have the moral standing of the large crowd imperiled by the jellyfish as compared to a small minority in even more serious peril.

Because of these complications, there seems to be no general rule connecting the precept of equal political concern with overall equality of economic well-being. Still, specific, legitimate activities of modern governments make political equality of concern an important source of reasons to regard economic inequalities as excessive, reasons that add to the case for reducing inequalities of income and wealth in the United States.

For one thing, the display of equal concern in governmental activities requires sensitivity to needs in the course of fundraising. Apart from the exceptional cases in which taxes are connected with special, optional activities, such as smoking cigarettes or (in the United States) duck-hunting, taxes should constitute an equal sacrifice for all unless unequal sacrifice will be to the absolute advantage of the less-than-equal. (Presumably, this absolute advantage would involve benefits depending on stronger incentives to invest, work, or deploy special skills than equal sacrifice would allow.) For familiar reasons involving diminishing marginal returns, equal sacrifice will require taxing the substantially better off at a higher rate than that faced by the less well off. If inequality of income net of taxes is not substantially lower than pretax income inequality, then the equalizing effect is too small, unless it is justifiable from the standpoint of those with lower pretax income. In the United States, taxes create only a small reduction in income inequality: in 1989, for example, they only led to a .041 reduction in the Gini coefficient, the most widely used measure of overall inequality.[32] This does not seem to reflect the equal sacrifice that political equality of concern, prima facie, requires.

[31] See Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, 239.

[32] See Frank Levy, *The New Dollars and Dreams* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998), 207. Although federal income taxes are mildly progressive, federal payroll taxes and state and local sales taxes are regressive. Altogether, taxes *and* government benefits only reduce the Gini coefficient by .071 (ibid., 206 f.). However, I shall argue in what follows that the reduction of poverty is a mandatory political goal. If so, then the provision of benefits to the

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The sphere of government activity at the other extreme from taking money—namely, help in making money—can also generate moral pressure to reduce inequality because of the imperative of equal concern. To overcome problems of instability and stagnation and to provide an adequate infrastructure for economic growth, citizens of every modern democracy support their government's engagement in the large-scale management of economic life in the interest of prosperity, through such interventions as macroeconomic steering, the crafting of taxes to encourage efficient investment, the adjustment of the framework of tariffs and loans channeling international commerce, and the development of public facilities to serve commercial needs. If fellow citizens respect one another, they must, then, seek prosperity-enhancing policies that display no less concern for the prosperity of those who are lathe operators and maids than for those who are executives and corporate lawyers.

Of course, even if government policies display equal concern, such policies may help some more than others in any given year, just as the transportation projects of a just government may, in a given year, provide more transportation aid for some regions than for others. But the generation of substantial inequalities in people's prosperity in their lives as a whole is another matter. Suppose that over the course of many years, some benefit from government policies much more than others do, and the benefits in prosperity tend to be in inverse proportion to economic need. In this situation, unless compensatory attention is paid to the prosperity of those left behind, some people's lives as a whole will be im-

poor is part of what should be done politically, not a means of insuring equity in sacrifices imposed in pursuit of political goals.

As noted in the text, the Gini coefficient is the most common measure of overall income inequality; it characterizes graphic representations of income distribution known as "Lorenz curves." Suppose a statistician, seeking the sum of all income in a population, first recorded the income of the poorest person, then recorded the sum of the incomes of the two poorest persons, the three poorest persons, and so on until the total was reached. A Lorenz curve represents the growth of the sums as more and more of the units in question (here, people), from poorest to richest, are included. Suppose that the x-axis of a graph corresponds to the proportion of the population that has been counted, while the y-axis corresponds to the proportion of the ultimate total that has been reached by the sum so far. Then the forty-five-degree diagonal from the origin to the (1, 1) point ("all people counted, all income accounted for") might be thought of as the diagonal of equality: on this line, every additional unit counted adds the same amount to the income sum, so the line represents a perfectly equal distribution. By the same token, a Lorenz curve that coincides with the x-axis up until a full count is achieved, at which point it shoots up to the (1,1) point, is the right angle of perfect inequality, in which nothing is added until the richest unit is counted. In any population in the real world, the actual Lorenz curve will be inside the triangle described by these two extremes. The Gini coefficient is twice the area between the diagonal of equality and the actual Lorenz curve in this representation of a distribution. Because of the doubling, a value of 1 corresponds to perfect inequality, and the actual Gini coefficient equals the ratio of (1) the area between the actual Lorenz curve and the diagonal of perfect equality to (2) the area of the triangle described by the diagonal of perfect equality and the right angle of perfect inequality. Since this ratio grows as the Lorenz curve bulges from perfect equality toward perfect inequality, the Gini coefficient can be seen as measuring where an actual distribution is located between the two extremes.

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proved much more than others' through the activities of a government that all are expected loyally to support; this will be a difference in benefit that cannot be justified in terms of differences in need. In response to such a situation, a government displaying equal concern in its project of enhancing people's prosperity will seek means of reducing the gap, to help those left behind.

The consequent just transfers to those left behind in the project of prosperity are genuinely egalitarian, not mere responses to absolute neediness. Perhaps if the government had not engaged in the project of enhancing economic prosperity, the neediness of the worse off who were left behind would not be great enough to justify transfers on grounds of compassion. Still, transfers to these people are justified as part of a broadly egalitarian effort to maintain appropriate impartiality. Moreover, the duty to help those left behind in the project of prosperity is a prime example of a duty of justice requiring attention to inequalities in income and wealth. Even more than in the case of unequal opportunity, growing inequalities of income and wealth are the timely and revealing signs of danger that the morally prohibited inequality of concern has emerged, while decreases in these gaps, favoring those who are worse off, are the timely and revealing signs of success in eliminating the morally excessive inequality. Finally, unequal gains from the project of prosperity, inversely proportional to financial need, produce an especially strong case for helping those left behind, because standard antiegalitarian considerations have less force here than usual. The additional gains here are not primarily due to additional self-reliant striving, and their sources are outside of family life and similarly protected private spheres.

Recently, the connections between prosperity and government policy in the United States have created mounting moral pressure to reduce such inequalities in benefit. In recent decades, the task of promoting prosperity has gone well, if we assess it by looking at overall measures. For example, per capita gross domestic product increased 38 percent between 1980 and 1998.[33] However, in promoting prosperity, governments ought to show equal concern for the economic flourishing of all citizens, not an ultimate concern for aggregates and averages. And between 1980 and 1998, gains in people's prosperity were typically in inverse proportion to their economic need. The economist Stephen Rose, tracking the fortunes of individuals in the largest and most representative database available for the United States, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, found that in the course of the 1980s, individuals whose family income was in the lowest quintile lost 4 percent on average, while individuals in the highest quin-

[33] See U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1999* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 1999), 464. The change is in inflation-adjusted dollars, like all dollar-based measurements of change that I will cite in what follows. The appropriate means of discounting for inflation are currently much disputed, but that dispute does not affect the broad trends on which I will rely, especially trends in inequality.

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tile gained 63 percent. Moreover, the distribution of gains favored a best-off minority over the vast majority, not just over the worst off: average gains regularly and sharply decreased at each step from the highest quintile to the lowest. (For example, the average gains of those in the second-highest quintile were less than half of those of people in the highest one.)[34] In 1995, as compared with 1975, the average inflation-adjusted earnings of machine operators were 16 percent lower among men and 9 percent lower among women, while the average earnings of professionals were 6 percent higher among men and 18 percent higher among women.[35] In 1980, the ratio of the average pay of chief executive officers of large corporations (including exercised stock options) to the average pay among factory workers was 42. By 1993, it had become 157; by 1999, 475.[36]

Economists strenuously disagree about the relative importance of the various factors contributing to the pattern of unequal gains seen in the United States over the last quarter-century. However, these controversies need not be resolved to vindicate worries that unequal benefit from government policies has substantially contributed to the pattern. Causal factors that are uncontroversially important—and collectively of overriding importance, in the view of a large majority of economists—have served as bases for unequal benefit from government policies, policies especially beneficial to those already best off. Macroeconomic and tax policies have quickened the pace of technological change. New technology is much more apt to make the skills of middle-aged, experienced blue-collar workers obsolete than to undermine the more generic and flexible skills of managers and professionals, who, in any case, can rely on substantial personal savings to finance their own retraining. Trade policies have facilitated globalization. Greater speed and flexibility in firms' worldwide pursuit of advantageous production sites and productive inputs threatens the work lives of blue-collar workers far more than it threatens the work lives of those engaged in the coordinative and administrative tasks of U.S.-based firms. Increased immigration has contributed to the productivity of an aging U.S.-born population (and serves international egalitarian interests as well), but at the same time, the inflow, mostly from

[34] These figures are from Stephen Rose, "Is Mobility in the United States Still Alive?" *International Review of Applied Economics* 13, no. 3 (1999): 423. Rose is concerned with family income adjusted for differences in family size, since pooling of resources within families typically determines how well the members fare. Since yearly fluctuations in income are a routine feature of economic life, the family incomes he associates with the start and finish are three-year averages spanning 1980 and 1989. Individuals are arranged in quintiles according to their average family income throughout the ten-year span.

[35] Richard Freeman, *When Earnings Diverge* (Washington, DC: National Policy Association, 1997), 11.

[36] See "Executive Pay: The Party Ain't Over Yet," *BusinessWeek*, April 26, 1993, 56; and Jennifer Reingold, "Executive Pay," *BusinessWeek*, April 17, 2000, 110. The figures on executive pay are based on *BusinessWeek*'s annual survey of such pay, which in 1993 examined executive compensation (i.e., salary, bonuses, and exercised stock options) at 365 of the largest U.S. corporations, as ranked by market value.

poorer countries, tends to increase competitive pressure at the low end of the wage scale.[37] Monetary and fiscal policies contributing to overall growth have also contributed to a vast long-term expansion in stock values—registered, for example, in a Dow Jones Industrial Average at the end of 1999 that was 3.2 times its value at the start of 1990, and 12.7 times its value at the start of 1980.[38] Since the top 20 percent of American households own 92 percent of U.S. financial wealth,[39] this side effect is bound to produce unequal benefits, in inverse proportion to need. In contrast, no currently favored means of enhancing overall prosperity facilitates gains that are in proportion to need.

No doubt, some well-intentioned policies specially directed at enhancing the prosperity of those left behind would defeat themselves, through inadequate attention to incentives and market-based efficiencies. But given the resources available and the scale of the gap between those left behind by government policy and those most helped, there is a heavy burden of proof on anyone who claims that all significant further efforts to reduce the gap, in recent years or in the immediate future, would have been or will be doomed. A project of collective advancement that all are expected to support has advanced people in an unequal way that is hard to justify on a basis of equal concern.

V. A Quasi-Egalitarian Concern

A political commitment to relieve poverty on humanitarian grounds, out of compassion for those who have sunk below an absolute level of destitution, is not, as such, a concern for inequality. However, when this project is regulated by equal political concern, the combination creates considerable pressure to reduce inequalities of income.[40] Among the poor, some are poorer than others, and equal concern dictates sensitivity to greater need (admittedly, moderated at times by attention to numbers). Among the nonpoor, equality of concern will favor using progressive taxation to raise funds for poverty relief, so that citizens who ought to fund this project do so on the basis of equal sacrifice. Thus, the use of government to relieve poverty implies reductions in income gaps among

[37] At a 1995 New York Federal Reserve colloquium on rising wage inequality, participating economists attributed, on average, 58 percent of the increase in wage inequality to the three factors of technological innovation, trade, and immigration. See Freeman, *When Earnings Diverge*, 40.

[38] The data on the Dow Jones Industrial Average is from http://www.djindexes.com.

[39] See Wolff, *Top Heavy*, 67 f.

[40] More precisely, inequalities of income or wealth. I will concentrate on effects on income, because poverty programs significantly reducing wealth inequality are so far from the political agenda: the poor would not be poor if they had significant wealth; wealth distribution among the nonpoor is much more severely skewed than income distribution; and taxes on wealth provide less than 1 percent of total tax revenues in all advanced economies. But see ibid. for powerful arguments that the bias against taxing wealth is misguided.

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all fellow citizens. But is there a duty to support the use of government to help the poor?

Suppose that someone is not in a position to live a life worthy of enjoyment, a life in which her choices have point and value because of their role in realizing worthwhile goals with which she can identify, thereby enjoyably expressing a wide range of human capacities and a well-developed human personality. Perhaps she lacks the means to have a home where she can enjoyably exercise her capacity for sociality and nurturance. Perhaps she has a physical condition that interferes with the enjoyable exercise of a suitably wide range of capacities, a condition that is curable for a price that she cannot afford. Because the adequate expression of human personality is blocked, anyone who appreciates the equal value of all will regard this situation as a reason to help. But it certainly will not be a conclusive reason. Indeed, every morally responsible person is aware that the world is full of hundreds of millions of such reasons which she ignores. If we were to govern ourselves by a requirement of alleviating serious deprivation whenever we could without creating similar deprivation in ourselves, we would be constantly threatened with distraction from our own self-expressive goals by neediness in others that we did not create and cannot control. So each of us may ration his humane concern by following standing policies of aid. What one must not do, if one appreciates the equal worth of all, is to reject standing policies of aid that are the best ways of expressing humane concern and that do not pose unacceptable risks of worsening one's own life. Since worthwhile life goals are flexible enough to leave a wide margin within which most of us could have less without leading a worse life, these rules can be materially demanding.

Whether this general perspective on humane concern requires extensive use of the state as a vehicle for helping needy compatriots depends on whether there are compelling reasons, in many circumstances, for preferring this vehicle of aid to the needy and for using it to help needy compatriots even if there are needier people outside the state's borders. There are such reasons.

1. Governmental management of help for needy compatriots, on the basis of equal concern, increases the amount that can be given without unacceptable risk that this aid to others will worsen the giver's life. Part of the value of income and wealth for advantaged households is competitive: usefulness in outbidding others, at least as well endowed, in competition for scarce resources. If I give too much to charity, I may be unable to afford a comfortable house in a quiet, pretty neighborhood, not because such houses are hard to build, but because I will be outbid by others who are not so charitable. So compulsory, tax-financed giving reduces risks of excessive charity. Since the government programs it sustains can be especially widely and reliably available, this vehicle of aid can also reduce the riskiness of giving by raising a safety net that may one day cushion the giver's fall.

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2. Imposed giving can help the needy to avoid especially oppressive forms of dependency. Public aid can be provided as a prerogative of citizenship, reliably available so long as the recipient fulfills requirements that he himself helps to formulate in the course of democratic deliberations. If the process of applying for aid inevitably results in demeaning interactions, aid without a means test is sometimes, to some extent, a feasible alternative. Best of all, government policies can sometimes express the proper valuing of self-reliance in a context of humane concern by emphasizing the expansion of access to jobs that are escape routes from poverty. In contrast, private charity makes people depend on the benevolent will of others, who are now concerned to alleviate a burden of poverty, but could change their concern without any joint deliberation.

3. There is a special duty to support tax-financed aid to needy fellow citizens, a duty that does not entail a similar commitment to aid the needy everywhere by every available means. One's fellow citizens have special standing because one relies on their loyalty to shared, life-determining institutions. This creates a duty of loyal concern for them, which does not extend to the needy worldwide. This special duty responds to an expectation of institutional loyalty, and need only be implemented through support for appropriate institutional measures—that is, through political support for laws rather than through private donations.

Thus, in addition to the general duty of compassion, there is a political duty to support government policies that would help poor fellow citizens, if the costs to nonpoor fellow citizens would not be so great as to impose worse lives on them. In the United States in recent decades, many of the nonpoor seem to have had resources to spare for such projects of aid. In 1999, the percentage of families below the official poverty line was the same as it had been in 1979, while average family income was 42 percent higher in the top quintile and 66 percent higher among the top 5 percent.[41] So, assuming that government policies could help the poor, there has been an unmet duty to embark on a political project of a pervasively income-equalizing kind, whose success would be properly monitored by determining whether income inequality, net of taxes and transfers, is declining.

VI. Improving the Milieu

The last broadly egalitarian concern that I will consider is the concern to reduce economic inequalities because of the effects of a milieu of in-

[41] See U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Income Tables—Families, Table F-3"; and U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Poverty Tables—Table 2, Poverty Status of People by Family Relationship, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1959 to 1999," available on-line at http://www.census.gov/hhes/poverty/histpov/hstpov2.html. Although the validity of the official poverty line is much debated, alternative definitions have little impact on the trend in the proportions of people below the line. See Danziger and Gottschalk, *America Unequal*, 62–65.

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equality on one's social and political relationships. Although these effects are the object of much current distress over increased inequality, tapping into this source of broad egalitarianism is tricky business, in part because of dangers of utopianism and unjustified manipulation (which I will consider in the next several paragraphs), and in part because of dangers of resentment (which I will examine at the end of this section).

By "utopianism," I mean naive expectations concerning the economic equalization that would be achieved by the pursuit of an improved social milieu. A prime example is the view sometimes held by American political philosophers that the elimination of excessive inequality in political influence would justify great reductions in inequality of income and wealth, a view encouraged by John Rawls's current belief that his stringent egalitarianism can be based on purely political values.[42]

Suppose that the current American system of campaign funding were replaced by a European-style system of public funding, and that everyone had the leisure, literacy, and basic information needed to form political judgments on the basis of the best nonspecialized news sources. The public funding would slightly reduce the value of having more income and wealth, and the increase in minimal civic capacity would require some improvement of the worst jobs and schools. But much economic inequality would remain, as would considerable inequality of political influence. However, the residual political inequality could not be eliminated without destroying economic efficiency on which the well-being of the worst off depends. For reasonable efficiency in a capitalist economy depends on a process of production and investment that inevitably gives rise to unequal political influence.

In the capitalist division of economic labor, some people occupy managerial and professional positions giving them knowledge, skills, and networks of acquaintance (and reflecting and reinforcing interests and temperaments) that make them especially likely to be recruited to positions of political power or to offer influential advice. An investment process driven by self-interested investors' lust for returns has turned out to be by far the most efficient means of resource-allocation; in this setting, governments must take care to avoid measures creating anxiety in investors about their returns. This side of utopia, the project of eliminating the severe residual inequalities of political influence that are based on these fundamental economic processes would be so destructive of the economic well-being of the worst off that the worst off would be reasonable to reject them.

My second warning about misguided efforts to change milieus concerned "manipulation," by which I mean a project of changing people's

[42] See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, where the connection between purely political values and the stringent egalitarianism of *A Theory of Justice* is affirmed, for example, at xlviii f. and 228 f. At Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 328, Rawls argues that a political duty to avoid excessive inequalities of political influence creates especially strong pressure to reduce economic inequality.

dispositions to choose that employs nonrational means to which they could not rationally consent. A prime example of unjustified manipulation would be the reduction of differences in income and wealth in order to increase receptiveness to egalitarian proposals. It is eminently plausible that people who do not share similar economic fates, are not affected in similar ways by government policies, and do not have to rely on one another for security and enjoyable joint activities will be less committed to avoiding the inequalities that egalitarians find excessive. However, many of those who do not recognize the excessiveness of these inequalities are well above the threshold that Rawls now labels "reasonableness": they are willing to engage in the principled and tolerant compromise that is characteristic of well-ordered democracy. It is a central goal of respectful politics to base choices on arguments that could be offered as justifications to fellow citizens above this threshold, who are themselves concerned to seek common ground on the basis of mutual respect. Changing the social milieu in order to change the political sentiments of others would constitute a political project based on a rationale that could not be offered as a justification to those others. So pursuing greater equality in order to promote egalitarian political sentiments departs from the deliberative mutuality of mutually respectful citizenship.

Still, these dangers can be avoided through certain arguments from community that do add to the justification and the breadth of condemnations of economic inequality. These sources of egalitarian concern, at once communitarian, individualist, and liberal, include such goals of mutuality as the encouragement of political reasonableness; the provision of facilities for the routine, active expression of equal respect; and the avoidance of excessive inequalities of social recognition.

Respect for fellow citizens does not always preclude favoring milieus because of their effects on political sentiments. That the political shaping of social environments, within the limits of civil liberties, will contribute to a public culture in which fellow citizens take one another's interests and convictions seriously is a very good reason for so shaping them. For example, the fact that the racial integration of a public school system would tend to reduce bigotry is a valid political reason in favor of the integration. The process involves the manipulation of sentiments, but the bigotry that would be modified by this milieu-therapy is below the threshold of "reasonableness."

If people do not share their fates and do not intermingle on terms of social equality, they are less apt to take one another's interests and convictions seriously. For example, they are less apt to attend to others, in the course of controversy, as people with something to say, as opposed to threats or mere consumers of public time. Because of the role of superior income and wealth in avoiding the need to rely on others, in creating especially affluent neighborhoods and gaining access to them, and in producing emblems of success, sharing of fates and intermingling on a basis of social equality become less common as inequality grows. So economic

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inequality can put people in a worse frame of mind to listen and learn from each other. This is a threat to deliberative mutuality, not just to the distinctive goals of economic egalitarianism, and it furnishes a politically legitimate reason to reduce the underlying economic inequalities.[43]

In addition to the sharing of fates, I have appealed to mere respectful intermingling as a social process that ought to be facilitated. Even apart from the goal of political reasonableness, this aspect of community provides a further reason to limit inequality. When economic inequality reduces such intermingling, it reduces the prevalence of ongoing interactions through which people can more adequately express their appreciation of everyone's equal worth.

Our attitudes toward others are expressed in the nature of our ongoing interactions with them, not just in our deliberations about them. If my fundamental attitude is appreciation of the equal worth of all, I will prefer ongoing interactions in which I encounter people from other walks of life on a footing of equality in polite and friendly ways; in which I learn what is on their minds in a spirit of mutual learning rather than as the target of complaining, requesting, or begging; and in which I send my children to schools where they learn along with, and from, these others. In short, I will, all else being equal, prefer an integrated life to a segregated one. But some social environments make it hard to live such a life. If integrated neighborhoods are rare or run down, local schools and parks are de facto segregated, and malls and shopping districts serve customers from only one walk of life, respectful intermingling is difficult. So the widening of access to respectful intermingling is a politically relevant goal.

Of course, even those who recognize the virtues of an intermingled life may have convictions, goals, or tastes that make a more segregated life rational and legitimate on balance. (Religious convictions attaching people to an encompassing faith community are perhaps the starkest example.) Still, there is nothing objectionably manipulative in the goal of making contexts for social intermingling widely available, though avoidable. Those who recognize the virtues of an intermingled life but have their special reasons to avoid it can. Those who do not see the special objective value

[43] Claims about the atomizing tendencies of inequality are hardly susceptible to neat statistical tests. But the results of empirical inquiries lend support to these egalitarian concerns. Ichiro Kawachi et al. determined the correlations, among states in the United States, between the degree of local income inequality and the degree of social distrust as reflected in local responses to such statements as "Most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance." The correlations are quite strong. For example, there is a correlation coefficient of $r = .73$ ($P < .0001$) associating local income inequality (by the researchers' favored measure) with the percentage agreeing that most people would try to take advantage. See Ichiro Kawachi et al., "Social Capital, Income Inequality, and Mortality," in Ichiro Kawachi, Bruce P. Kennedy, and Richard G. Wilkinson, eds., *The Society and Population Health Reader* (New York: New Press, 1999), 2:226 f. In this essay, Kawachi et al. seek to explain the powerful association, independent of absolute income, in social environments throughout the world, between income inequality and bad health, bad health on average as well as among the worst off. If anyone could establish the mechanism underlying this association, she might provide the most powerful of all sources of broadly egalitarian concern.

of intermingling will be treated as making a mistake if equality is promoted on these grounds, but integrated environments are not promoted in order to change their outlooks. They are promoted in order to facilitate interactions, rightly sought by others, that depend on the public environment. Policies meant to preserve or restore environments facilitating the routine, active expression of mutual respect are as appropriate to just government as policies of preserving or restoring places of natural beauty.

One further milieu-centered concern about inequality (the last that I will try to establish) is an aspect of the widely noted tendency for growing inequality to make the material attainments of the worst off no longer good enough, even if they are no less than they were before. Through its effects on credence, welcome, and the sharing of concerns, greater inequality can worsen the less successful, even when they have the same as they did before, by worsening their terms of social recognition—that is, the extent to which they are appreciated as valued partners in social life.

We need to be credited by others as reliable people capable of making our way by offering what is of value and valued by others. But those whose approval we need rarely have direct knowledge of our lives. So it is important that we establish our credibility as co-participants in social life by displaying signs of sufficient success in social activity—dressing well enough, having a nice-enough home, being fluent enough in mainstream culture, and so forth. Here, what is good enough to meet most others' expectations (or, more properly, not to excite their doubts) inevitably rises as the general level of attainment grows.

In addition to economic losses and political neglect due to lack of such credibility, those who are much less successful than most cannot expect a broad welcome when they seek to interact with most others in a nonsubordinate way. Large differences in economic resources threaten to make interaction on terms of equality a source of mutual discomfort due to fears of condescension and resentment, lack of fluent grasp of local etiquette, misunderstandings of one another's capacities and aspirations, and the absence of shared pursuits that provide the routine currency of social exchange. Many people will be nervous if their children play with the children of those who are by far the worst off, however well off the worst off are.

Finally, those who are much less successful than most can expect that their characteristic life-problems will only be a focus of public attention when the attention is tinged with pity. In one of his deep inquiries into the burdens of being African-American, W. E. B. Du Bois writes, "Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question . . . How does it feel to be a problem?"[44] This experience of being a problem is very different from the experience of having problems that are the normal challenges of life in one's society, and any self-respecting person will strongly prefer the latter.

[44] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903], in Du Bois, *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1996), 363.

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Unequal social recognition is objectionable independently of its noncomparative costs to the worst off. A society in which people are generally unfriendly to one another, paying attention to strangers' problems only when the duty of compassion demands this, is, no doubt, a bad society. But a society in which some people have less access than others to valued partnership in social life is vulnerable to an additional charge of unfairness.

What is the relationship between inequality of wealth or income and the goal of promoting mutuality—the political openness, ease of democratic intermingling, and broad social recognition that characterize appropriately egalitarian milieus? Large inequalities in wealth will be especially important threats to mutuality because of the role of wealth in determining where people buy houses. Thus, the vast and increasing inequality in wealth in the United States in recent decades is a serious concern. The income inequality that matters for mutuality, as opposed to income inequalities that can matter as causes of unequal opportunity or as instances of unequal provision, is primarily the inequality of those far below the median; their incomes being so much less than most people's in their society contributes to their marginalization. It is a serious concern, then, that one in five U.S. households in 1992 had an income over the previous five years that was less than half of the median five-year household income, and that one in six was in this situation even when the cash equivalent of government benefits was included.[45]

Still, when a factor contributes to a morally troubling inequality, it can be misguided, nonetheless, to weaken that factor in order to cope with the problem. When we shift our focus from the causal role of income and wealth inequality in weakening mutuality to the policy question of whether income and wealth inequality ought to be reduced in order to promote mutuality, costs in terms of resentment loom large, so large that they might seem to make the defense of egalitarian milieus a politically irrelevant goal.

Suppose egalitarians argue that the mutuality imperiled by increased inequality in income or wealth ought to be strengthened by policies raising the worst off closer to others in terms of income or wealth, policies that involve redistributive taxation or programs meant to increase, preferentially, the income or wealth of those who have the least. The mutual attention that such a remedy seeks to promote is positive and empathic. But the greater the costs imposed on some in pursuit of greater equality overall, the more likely it is that resentment, not empathy, will be the outcome. Short of manipulative secrecy about their underlying justifications, how can milieu-oriented egalitarians hope to contain this psycho-

[45] Robert E. Goodin et al., *The Real Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 276. More precisely, these proportions are 20.6 percent and 16.3 percent, and both are adjusted for differences in family size. In the most nearly comparable period that Goodin et al. could assess (1990–94), the Netherlands, whose economy is at least as dynamic overall as the United States', reduced the after-benefits proportion to 1.4 percent.

logical cost? If they cannot, then the cultivation of civic mutuality, like the cultivation of friendships, should, for all its importance, be a purely personal task.

In containing costs of resentment, piling redistributive burdens on the rich has legitimate uses, so long as the rich do not have valid reasons to complain that are more serious than the reasons to object to the constraints on mutuality that are overcome. If resources deriving from taxation of those on top are used to help the worst off, improvements in the relationship of the worst off to the vast majority between the best and worst off might, on balance, enhance mutuality. However, increasing reliance on this strategy is limited not just by effects on incentives and by the increasing moral seriousness of higher levels of imposed costs, but also by the fact that as the imposed costs rise, there will be growing resentment among the many who hope to become rich (even if these hopes are often highly overoptimistic).

Apart from concentrating tax burdens on the rich, resentment can be reduced by combining the appeal to threatened ties of community with appeals to other goals of equality: appeals to the need to make life prospects more equal or to compensate for inequalities of provision. Benefits of advantages unearned by one's own efforts are easier to give up ungrudgingly, and these other goals of equality have such gains as their sole intended target. Inevitably, attempts to implement the other goals overshoot their intended target, but intentions make a difference with respect to resentment. When costs in resentment are contained through this combination of rationales, the need to strengthen special ties of community becomes, in effect, a supplement to arguments from equality of opportunity and equality of provision, adding to the joint force of reasons to reduce inequalities of income and wealth.

In any case, the reduction of gaps in income and wealth is hardly the only project of those who seek to reduce troubling fissures in mutuality, based on economic circumstances, by political means. In particular, the public provision of facilities that enhance mutuality and are open to all is less apt to prompt resentment than the use of some people's taxes in order to increase other people's income or wealth. Indeed, in the United States today, efforts to save downtown shopping districts and emphasis on public education rather than voucher schemes as a means of improving education seem the chief expressions of the goal of egalitarian community.

Perhaps this is as it should be, given the special dangers of resentment, and the promotion of mutuality should rarely be the main justification for policies reducing gaps in income and wealth. Still, a moral interest in egalitarian milieus will add to the importance of paying attention to inequality of income and wealth when monitoring social justice. Income and wealth distributions in which many make much less than the median serve as important warnings that mutuality may be in peril. Moreover, because it strengthens the case for reducing inequality in life prospects

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and the case for helping those left behind by the project of prosperity, concern for reduced mutuality increases the importance of gains in equality of income and wealth as indicators of progress in social justice. For gains in income and wealth equality are the central means of monitoring the joint pursuit of all three broadly egalitarian goals.

VII. Conclusion

Is a concern that inequalities of income and wealth not become too great, as opposed to a concern for the suffering of those who suffer absolutely, an expression of equal respect, or is it simply an endorsement of envy? Egalitarians who have lost faith in the old, simplifying premises—that is, the generic connection between equal respect and equal shares and the requirement of attention to all-purpose means—lack a simple rebuttal to the charge of envy. However, if this discussion has been on the right track, they should not be embarrassed by this lack. There are several different reasons to be concerned about various economic inequalities. None of these inequalities is mainly a matter of income or wealth, and each must be judged in light of reasons not to do too much to reduce inequality. Still, there is a powerful case that capitalism as it would be without political intervention and capitalism as it is in the United States and elsewhere give rise to economic inequalities that are excessive unless they are a by-product of measures helping the worst off, an excuse that is highly unlikely to be valid in every case.[46] Moreover, the reduction of gaps in income and wealth sometimes has a role to play in reducing these ultimately troubling inequalities, and attention to inequalities of income and wealth is centrally important in monitoring the proper political response to excessive inequality.

In the fragmented view of equality I have been presenting in this essay, there is no general societal ideal of providing maximum access to income and wealth for those in the social position in which access is least. But at present, in the United States and many other countries, justice demands more movement in the direction of this ideal than any proposal on the current electoral agenda would produce. The old egalitarianism had its heart in the right place.

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[46] That inequalities in Great Britain are at least as excessive as inequalities in the United States is suggested by the studies described in Ivan Reid, *Class in Britain* (London: Polity, 1998); and Gordon Marshall and Adam Swift, "Social Class and Social Justice," *British Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 2 (1993): 187–211. For studies suggesting that the same kinds of inequalities are excessive, though in varying degrees, in other relatively advanced economies, see Gordon Marshall, Adam Swift, and Stephen Roberts, *Against the Odds?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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