

**Phil 290-1: Political Rule**  
**Monday, February 24, 2014**

**Main questions:**

1. How should social inequality be understood (assuming that there is something there to understand)? (Ben)
2. Is social inequality something to be avoided in itself? Or is it something to be avoided only derivatively, or conditionally? (Mike, Daniel, Nicholas, Joseph)
3. Do the answers weaken the case for democracy? Even if social inequality is something to be avoided only under certain conditions, for example, perhaps those conditions obtain in just those contexts in which we think that democracy is called for.

**Ben:**

1. Relations of social inequality exist (or are objectionable) between A and B only if they are mutually recognized by A and B.
  2. A can have greater opportunity for influence over political decisions than B even though this is not mutually recognized by A and B.
  3. Therefore, if inequalities in influence over political decisions are objectionable even in such circumstances, it is not because they constitute relations of social inequality.
- Premise 1 seems plausible: Natural to think that there are “ongoing relations” only insofar as they are mutually recognized. Can two people be, e.g., friends if they aren’t aware of it?
  - Nevertheless, I have doubts about 1. If one person has all the power over the others, then others are socially subordinate, even if they don’t know this. Moreover, this can happen not only with asymmetries of power, but also with asymmetries of authority and consideration. One person may enjoy greater authority and consideration than another, although this fact is scrupulously kept from the other.
    - One brother is king, the other, held in another part of the castle, only thinks that he is. His “commands” carry no weight beyond the walls; no shrines are erected in his honor; etc.
    - *If* one cares about social equality, and one discovers that this is the situation, then one will be concerned not just with relations *henceforth*, but also with relations *up until now*.

**Mike A.:**

Mere abductive argument from intuitions about cases seems problematic. Some further argument would be nice.

- I agree! But what would it be? When it comes to claims about non-instrumental value, it’s not clear what the alternative is.

Why not the instrumental argument that says that what is wrong with social inequality is simply that the perception of being a social inferior is debilitating?

- As with Ben’s point, there would be no worry about “hidden” inequalities in power, authority, and consideration.

- It seems an odd complaint when put in the first person: “I don’t care about being treated as an inferior. My objection is to the fact that when I believe that I am so treated, I lose self-confidence, which makes it harder to achieve my aims.”

**Daniel:**

Maybe the real worry about social inequality is about lack of autonomy.

A lot will depend on what “autonomy” means:

- “Not being ruled by another, having no master”—The absence of a certain kind of relation to other persons
  - In my view, this is best understood as not being socially subordinate (although Pettit’s “domination” is another possibility).
- “Being the author of one’s life”—Enjoying the opportunity to select and pursue activities, from a wide range, as guided by one’s own choices and values. (See Raz, *Morality of Freedom*.)
  - I take such opportunities be included among the “means” to which all have “independent claims.” Material resources, health, education, freedom from interference by others, etc.
  - I also take such autonomy to be possible under rule by the ascetics, and perhaps also in Hierarcadia. Granted, everyone is barred from some pursuits that open to others (whether from native aptitude or on other grounds). But your autonomy doesn’t require that *every* pursuit be open to you, only that *enough* be.

**Nicholas:**

Is deafness intrinsically bad? Maybe it’s just different from having hearing.

- This may be right. What I should have said: “There is a coherent (although possibly false) view about deafness that some take. Whether or not this view is correct as applied to deafness within a flourishing deaf culture, it seems to me that something analogous is correct as applied to social equality within a role-respectful culture.”

Hierarcadia is meant to test the suggestion that what matters are not relations of social inequality as such, but instead role-respectful relations. What matters is simply that people occupy roles that (i) they value and that (ii) are recognized by others as having that value. We (perhaps) value roles of equality, but the Hierarcadians value roles of inequality.

- It would be compatible with this that relations of social inequality are to be avoided here and now. So the case for democracy, at least for us, might survive.
- In any event, I can’t suppress the imperialist impulse. On this view, if those on the lower rungs should cease to value their roles, but those on the higher rungs were to continue to value their roles, then this would just be a tragic conflict. This seems to me mistaken: the claims of those on the lower rungs to equality seem to have a force that the claims of those on the higher rungs to stay there lack. However, this is what Nicholas denies.

**Joseph:**

Do we care about social equality? Reasons to doubt:

- Something good about *servility*. Isn’t this a vice?

- Something good about *humility*. This is a virtue. But perhaps it's just a matter of showing that one doesn't put oneself *above* others.
- There are master-servant relationships in which nothing (or little) seems amiss. (Alfred and Bruce Wayne, *Downton Abbey* very good on this.) *This* seems me the most forceful way of putting the point.

Why does little seem amiss in these cases, whereas something seems amiss in other cases?

- My thought is that it is because these relationships are role-respectful.
- Joseph suggests that it is instead because the unequal roles are
  - not imposed involuntarily and
  - not based on some denial of moral equality.

*Weaker*: The objection is to *unequal* roles that are involuntarily imposed or based on a denial of moral equality.

*Stronger*: The objection is to *any* roles that are involuntarily imposed or based on a denial of moral equality.

- Against *Stronger*, isn't there an asymmetry here? The imposition of relations of *equality* where one party is unwilling doesn't seem as objectionable as the imposition of relations of *inequality* where one party is unwilling.
- Might alternatives to democracy involve the involuntary imposition of unequal roles? So might the argument for democracy survive, even if *Weaker* is correct?
- The fact that we find some hierarchy unproblematic in our society (say between Alfred and Bruce) needs to be evaluated with care, because:
  - When there is standing opportunity to exit what would otherwise be relations of social inequality, they don't much seem like relations of social inequality in the first place. (It's as though people are playing at being masters and servants.)— But perhaps this only shows that *Weaker* is correct?
  - Also, some relations of inequality are moderated by equality at a higher level of the hierarchy. Political democracy takes some of the pressure off of inequality within structures subject to political control.