Phil 116, April 19, 2010
Scanlon, "The Diversity of Objections to Inequality"

We have strong reasons to eliminate inequality in society. But...
- these reasons are *diverse*, and
- they need not appeal to *substantive equality* as a fundamental value: that it is good that, or that we ought to see to it that, everyone's life has equal income, welfare, etc.

Objections to inequality:
1. Humanitarian concern: to alleviate suffering or severe deprivation:
- When A has more than he needs and B has less than she needs, transferring from A to B can alleviate B's suffering without causing A to suffer.
- Inequality not a problem, so long as everyone has what he or she needs.
- No reason for "leveling down": "eliminating the benefits of the better off (or for wishing that they had never been created) even if these cannot be transferred to the worse off."

2. Preventing stigmatizing differences in status: to avoid treating people as, or making them feel, inferior:
- *Examples*: rank, deference, attitudes of superiority, "large differences in material well-being can be objectionable on the same ground: when the mode of life enjoyed by some people sets the norm for society, those who are much worse off will feel inferiority and shame at the way they must live."
- Inequality is a problem, if it has such consequences.

3. Avoid unacceptable forms of power and domination:
Greater economic power translates into
- greater power to "determine what gets power to produced, what kinds of employment are offered, what the environment of a town or state is like, and what kind of life one can live there" and
- greater *political* power. (Hence, a reason for campaign finance regulations.)
- Inequality is a problem, if it has such consequences. But might be compatible with significant inequality.

4. Preserve the equality of starting places that procedural fairness requires:
- Equality—a "level playing field"—may be an essential precondition of the fairness of certain competitive processes: for example, admission to college.
- Not the same as 3, because the result may not be inequality in *power*.
- Inequality is a problem, if it has such consequences. But might be compatible with significant inequality.

5. Procedural fairness sometimes supports a case for equality of outcomes
- If people have equal claims to some benefit, and the distributive procedure is supposed to be responsive to these claims, then it will be unfair if (absent some special reason) some get more of the benefit than others.
- For example, equal claims to what we have collectively produced.

Summary:
- 1, 3, and 4 are based on moral ideas that do not directly have to do with equality: suffering, domination, fairness. They might be compatible with significant inequality.
- 2 and 5 seem to represent the strongest concerns about inequality.

More on 2: being made to feel inferior:
Two kinds of harms:
1. *Individualistic*: harms an individual's sense of self-worth.
2. *Relational*: harms bonds to other people. A loss for better off and worse off alike.

How might institutions give rise to such feelings?
1. By denying people basic rights? But here the main objection would be to the infringement of rights, not to the experiences caused.
2. By expressing judgments of inferiority (e.g. requiring acts of deference)? But enlightened institutions tend to avoid this.
3. Institutions may *unintentionally* make *reasonable* citizens feel inferior:
   - "The obvious examples are economic institutions which yield such great disparities of wealth and income that some people experience shame and humiliation because they must live in a way that is far below what most people in society regard as minimally acceptable."
   - "There are also noneconomic examples, such as a society in which almost everyone places great value and importance on certain forms of accomplishment, forms that many, but not all, can attain, and in which it is regarded as a great misfortune not to be 'successful' in these ways."

Consider meritocratic discrimination that (i) is not based on unfounded assumptions about differences in ability but on actual, demonstrated differences, and (ii) it is not unnecessary but serves important social goals (e.g., the admissions process at UC Berkeley). "[T]hough not unfair, this meritocracy can be expected to deprive some people of a secure sense of self-worth— of the sense of their own value and the belief that their lives and accomplishments are worthwhile."

Response 1: Regard "good moral character, conscientiousness as a citizen, and devotion to the well-being of one's family and friends" as more important indices of self-worth than success in the meritocratic competition.

Response 2: Diversification: If there are many different forms of accomplishment and distinction no one of which dominates as *the* socially important measures of success in life, then the threat to people's sense of self-worth is mitigated.