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## *Rethinking Inequality: Introduction*

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Philosophers—even social and political philosophers—are not known for grappling with research and empirical data from the “hard” social sciences. But some problems seem to demand just such an engagement: inequality, we argue, is one such problem. Rising economic inequality in advanced industrialized states—its causes and consequences—is a problem much studied by social epidemiologists, urban studies scholars, economists, sociologists, and political scientists. Some aspects of this rising inequality, such as the concentration of wealth to an unprecedented degree, have also captured the attention of the mainstream media: income and wealth inequality have reached historic highs in the United States—where the top 1 percent owns nearly 50 percent of the wealth—as well as Canada, where the top quintile now controls 70 percent of the wealth and earns 44 percent of all employment income. The possible consequences of social and economic inequality on public health, economic growth, mobility, levels of social trust, educational and employment opportunities, and crime rates are among the questions explored by social scientists studying inequality.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, philosophers have not had much to say about this trend toward greater levels of inequality in wealth and income, nor about its possible impact on society or individual well-being. Normative reflection on economic

inequality by moral and political philosophers has instead generally focused on broader, more foundational questions: Which aspects or forms of equality are most important for a just, decent society, and which are comparatively insignificant? Are equal respect and political equality compatible with a high degree of social and economic inequality? Should an ideal of equality focus on improving the condition of the worse off, or instead aim to equalize the material conditions of all? And on what grounds might a society strive to reduce inequality, and at what costs to citizens' social, economic, and political freedoms?<sup>2</sup> The pattern of rising inequality in rich countries is of course mirrored by rising economic inequality worldwide: the gap between rich and poor regions of the world is, by and large, widening. The consequences of this inequality, and the particular normative challenges and demands it raises, are distinctive, and lie at the heart of discussions of global (in)justice.<sup>3</sup>

These two broad approaches to the problem of growing inequality—that of the philosopher, and that of the social scientist—have for the most part not intersected. As a consequence, a conversation about economic inequality that looks squarely at empirical trends regarding inequality at the same time as posing critical philosophical and normative questions would seem to be long overdue. It was this thought that motivated this special issue of *Philosophical Topics*.

There are at least two reasons, we suggest, why philosophers and political theorists writing on equality and inequality ought to engage social scientific research on inequality. First, much philosophical writing about inequality relies already upon certain assumptions about the *causes* of concrete social and economic inequalities, yet fails to make these assumptions explicit. Some philosophical positions, such as luck egalitarianism, make much of the difference between inequality that is due to choice and that which results from unchosen circumstances;<sup>4</sup> only the latter, which are considered unfair, ought to be rectified. Yet there is considerable research in social psychology and labor economics that suggests that individuals' choices are not easily separable from their social and economic circumstances.

In the present volume, several papers speak to the vexed issue of the intersection of choice and circumstances, and how it should shape our normative understanding of this relationship—and inequality more generally. In “Egalitarianism and Perceptions of Inequality,” Derrick Darby and Nyla Branscombe draw on American social psychology research showing that the extent to which people perceive income inequalities as a result of choices as opposed to structural obstacles and hierarchies is highly influenced by their own group-based affiliation—specifically, their race or social class. Whether you are black or white in America shapes how you perceive the causes of inequalities in income and wealth, and so the fairness—or injustice—of those inequalities. As Darby and Branscombe argue, if our ability to draw sharp and accurate distinctions between choice and circumstances is cast into doubt, this cannot help but impact our assessment of which inequalities are unfair and require collective action to repair.

Joseph Fishkin's essay, “The *How* of Unequal Opportunity,” implicitly questions the distinction between choice and circumstance by highlighting the struc-

tural obstacles that help to create unequal opportunities in education and employment in affluent, yet unequal, societies. These “bottlenecks” to opportunity include not only social class background but also less obvious impediments, such as obstacles to consumer credit and the lack of educational capital to transfer to one’s children. Social science research showcases a much wider range of sources of unequal opportunity than political theorists and philosophers have hitherto explored; if the latter are truly concerned about the impact of these bottlenecks to opportunity, it behooves them to take this literature seriously.

In “Our Choices, Our Wage Gap?,” Kristi A. Olson challenges the widely held view that choice with respect to jobs or careers *by itself* necessarily exonerates gender wage inequalities. One reason it cannot do so is that the set of options that people have to choose from may be “objectionable” in some way. Olson focuses on the problem of government regulatory regimes (such as the licensing of professions), citing research that shows that these have tended to favor male-dominated jobs. Thus, even if women choose jobs or professions that offer lower wages, this does not make the gendered gap in wages “fair”; the gap itself may be caused by government (or other) policies that are not, in themselves, well justified or fair.

A second pressing reason why philosophers and political theorists ought to pay attention to social scientific research on rising economic inequality is that it may reveal important consequences of inequality on people’s lives, and on societies as wholes, that we have not yet adequately considered. There exists, by now, considerable social science research—chiefly in sociology, economics, political science, social psychology, and social epidemiology—about the consequences (or lack thereof) of inequality in income, wealth, and social class for health, levels of social trust, crime, and other matters. There is still considerable controversy over whether relative, not merely absolute, material inequality causes distinctive harms; the argument from the “social determinants of health” (best associated with Richard Wilkinson and Michael Marmot) suggests that relative inequalities do indeed have a harmful impact on health and social well-being. Whether relative inequality can be shown to cause separate negative consequences (i.e., beyond those associated with poverty) is something that prioritarian egalitarians should be curious about, since they focus on scarcity, rather than on inequality *per se*. To the extent that prioritarians do not usually care about distributions above a certain minimum, they may risk overlooking a host of (alleged) harmful effects of relative inequality on individuals and society as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

In “Desert and Fairness in Criminal Justice,” Erin I. Kelly looks anew at the relationship between socioeconomic inequalities and criminality, drawing on research that shows a strong correlation between economic disadvantage and crime. If we concede that we share responsibility for “the conditions of individual choice, that is for social justice,” then we should agree, Kelly argues, that social inequalities and injustice constitute “an intolerable context for distributing punishment according to individual desert.”

Eszter Kollar and Daniele Santoro, in their essay, “Not by Bread Alone: Inequality, Relative Derivation, and Self-Respect,” explore the relationship between

economic inequality and levels of self-respect. Philosophers in the analytical tradition have long considered formal equality to require something called “equal consideration and respect,” but the issue of self-respect has received less attention. Citing empirical data on *relative deprivation*, Kollar and Santoro suggest that this may be a substantial component of the link between inequality and lowered levels of self-respect. Social psychology research can help us to identify different important aspects of relative deprivation, making it possible to see that “inequality impairs people’s self-respect by affecting the perceived sense of meaningful options available to them.”

Evidence about the concrete harm of social and economic inequality can also influence the particular normative ideal of equality that political philosophers endorse. Fabian Schuppert, in “Suffering from Social Inequality: Normative Implications of Empirical Research on the Effects of Inequality,” suggests that empirical data about inequality’s harms, although still a matter of some debate, should cause us to care about relational inequalities in society rather than “unequal material distributions per se.” Echoing Elizabeth Anderson’s ideal of democratic equality, Schuppert suggests that normative political philosophers should use empirical research on the impact of different kinds of social and economic inequalities to refine their accounts of what kind of equality is valuable and worth defending.

Not surprisingly, egalitarians disagree about which aspects of inequality are harmful and unjust, and which are not. In “Social Relations Egalitarianism versus Luck Egalitarianism: What Is at Stake?,” Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen notes that increasing distributional inequality may not be viewed as a “trend towards greater injustice” by social relations egalitarians like Elizabeth Anderson—in contrast to luck egalitarians—because their primary concern is with relations of equal respect and concern. Lippert-Rasmussen, however, argues that once the rhetorical differences are parsed, there are no fundamental conceptual differences between luck egalitarians and proponents of democratic equality. To the extent that they are concerned egalitarians, both, he concludes, have reason to be worried about the impact of increasing socioeconomic inequality.

Empirical economic data may also reveal new dimensions of the harm caused by inequality. Alex Gourevitch, in “Debt, Freedom, and Inequality,” argues that personal debt in contemporary industrialized societies, much of which is incurred simply to gain access to essential goods and services, “creates new kinds of unfreedom.” From student loans with onerous interest rates to sky-rocketing consumer debt, indebtedness constitutes a deeply problematic aspect of rising socioeconomic inequality that thinkers concerned about personal freedom should care about.

Whether we view (socioeconomic) inequality as intrinsically bad, or merely instrumentally so, will in part depend on whether evidence about the harmful consequences of such inequality is clear and compelling. Richard Arneson cautions that it is much too soon to conclude from available empirical research on economic inequality in affluent societies that it *necessarily* has a host of bad effects; many of the effects, such as those pertaining to people’s health, are still open to debate. In

part because of this uncertainty, Arneson argues, in his article, “Rethinking Luck Egalitarianism and Unacceptable Inequalities,” that we ought to view inequalities as (possibly) instrumentally bad rather than bad in and of themselves. Similarly, equality of condition, defended by luck egalitarians like G. A. Cohen as morally valuable for its own sake, ought instead to be treated as (possibly) instrumentally good. Arneson argues that valuing equality of condition as an intrinsic good is compatible with disregard for “whether people’s lives go better or worse,” insofar as it cannot rule out a strategy of “leveling down” as a way to attain greater equality. Accordingly, a more adequate account of social justice should, in his view, focus on equality strictly as a means to particular desired ends.

The papers included in this volume aim to foster discussion among philosophers, social scientists, and even public policy analysts about the phenomenon of rising inequality in affluent, industrialized societies. Philosophers’ contributions to this discussion include an ability to offer clear conceptualizations of the nature of different forms of equality and inequality; the possible social and individual goods at stake where inequality and equality are concerned; and the normative and ethical demands raised by rising socioeconomic inequality. A cross-disciplinary conversation, we think, has the potential to break new conceptual ground in response to the problem of growing inequality.

Some of the most important concerns in political theory and philosophy, posed again and again by philosophers since antiquity, need to be posed anew in light of rapidly growing socioeconomic inequality: Is citizens’ political equality—their political participation as well as influence—compromised by economic inequality? Does growing income inequality affect the key measures of citizens’ social equality, such as comparable health and education outcomes (or fair access to health care and education)? And how does economic inequality and growing poverty impact other elements of a just and flourishing society, such as the level of social trust and sense of community? Political theorists and philosophers, as noted above, have arguably been too concerned with abstract notions of equality and inequality, and can benefit from dialogue with social scientists and policy scholars who study the social and economic trends surrounding inequality. At the same time, social scientists need normative arguments about (and against) inequality; and they can draw from philosophical defenses of equality, using these to inform possible policy responses to the negative effects of rising social and economic inequality.

## NOTES

1. For some examples, see Eric M. Uslaner, “Divided Citizens: How Inequality Undermines Trust in America,” *Demos: A Network for Ideas and Action*, [www.demos-usa.org](http://www.demos-usa.org) (2004); Lawrence R. Jacobs and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Inequality and American Democracy: What We Know and What We Need to Learn* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005); Adam Whitworth, “Inequality and Crime

- across England: A Multilevel Modelling Approach,” *Social Policy and Society* 11 (2012); E. Emerson, “Relative Child Poverty, Income Inequality, Wealth, and Health,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 301, 4 (2009).
2. Some among the seminal works in political theory on inequality include John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999); Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Brian Barry, *Justice as Impartiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Gerald A. Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Elizabeth Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?” *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (1999).
  3. These issues of global economic inequality and injustice are not taken up by the present volume, which instead focuses on intra-, not inter-, state inequalities (admittedly a troublesome distinction in the wake of globalization).
  4. For just one example, see Richard J. Arneson, “Luck Egalitarianism Interpreted and Defended,” *Philosophical Topics* 32, 1 (2004).
  5. For example, see Derek Parfit, “Equality and Priority,” *Ratio* 10, 3 (1997).