

Wealth, Power, and Equality

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Introduction

The Question. What is the deepest problem with inequalities of wealth?

The Answer. They constitute asymmetries of power. When you have more money than someone, you can (usually) pay them to do what you want.

Call this view The Power View. Let me distinguish it from two alternative answers:

- **The Consumption View:** Inequalities of wealth cause inequalities of consumption.
- **The Political View:** Inequalities of wealth cause inequalities of political power.

The Power View clearly identifies a different problem than The Consumption View. The problem is not that the rich have bigger houses or nicer cars; it is that they have power over other people. And it identifies a much broader problem than The Political View. The problem is not (simply) that the rich have more influence over public policy. It is that they can directly pay people to do what they want.

The Core Argument

The argument at the core of the view is:

1. Inequalities of wealth constitute asymmetries of power.
2. Asymmetries of power constitute objectionably inegalitarian relationships.
3. Therefore, inequalities of wealth constitute objectionably inegalitarian relationships.

Let's clarify some terms. We'll understand *asymmetric power* in terms of power over. There is an asymmetry of power between A and B when A has more power over B than B has over A (or vice versa). *Constitution* is a non-causal relationship of determination. It is the relationship between a table and its parts or a country and its citizens. *Inegalitarian relationships* are relationships of subordination or domination. They are the relationship of master to slave or lord to peasant. We can now defend the premises.

Here I'm understanding *depth* in modal terms. A problem is deep insofar as it holds in more possible situations. Deeper problems are often more prevalent than shallower problems, and demand the most radical policy responses.

Many people endorse the ideas behind the Political View. For passing mentions, see Rawls (2001, 130–31), Schemmel (2011, 375–80) and Scanlon (2018, 74–94).

The Power View is a relational egalitarian account of distributive justice. See e.g. Anderson (1999) and Scheffler (2003). It differs from previous such views in being much more concrete on how material inequalities generate relational inequalities.

The idea that inegalitarian relationships are distinctively objectionable is mainly rooted in relational egalitarian work, but also has clear affinities to neo-republican thought, e.g. Pettit (1997).

The notion of “constitution” here is synonymous with that of “grounding” in the recent metaphysics literature. See e.g. Rosen (2010) and Fine (2012). Grounding connections tend to be much more modally robust than mere causal connections, so this makes the problem the argument identifies a relatively deep one.

Inegalitarian Relationships

Let's think about the second premise. The idea behind this premise is that some inegalitarian relationships are intrinsically objectionable and these relationships are in part constituted by power asymmetries.

- **Intrinsic v. Instrumental?** One might think that inegalitarian relationships are objectionable solely because they're instrumentally bad: they have bad causal consequences. But that's wrong. We can think of instrumentally good inegalitarian relationships, such as rule by a benevolent, competent dictator. The benevolent dictator might rule us better than we can rule ourselves. Yet, intuitively, our relationship with him is still objectionable.
- **Power v. Attitudes?** One might think that inegalitarian relationships are solely constituted by attitudinal disparities. What it is to be a superior is to receive more positive and fewer negative attitudes than inferiors. But that's wrong too. Imagine you're controlled by someone to whom you express contempt. This is a relationship of asymmetric power with no attitudinal disparity. Yet, intuitively, it is an objectionably inegalitarian relationship.

I think we should conclude that asymmetries of power do constitute objectionably inegalitarian relationships.

Conceptions of Power

One might object to the first premise on the basis of an account of power. Here are three alternative accounts of power:

- **Behavior.** A has power over B insofar as A can affect B's behavior.
- **Well-being.** A has power over B insofar as A can make B's life worse.
- **Option sets.** A has power over B insofar as A can reduce B's options.

The first view vindicates the claim that being able to offer someone money to do something would give one power over them. The second two views allow us to resist this claim. But we should reject both views.

Ad Hoc. For a start, these view both seem objectionably ad hoc. Why is it only the ability to degrade someone's situation (their well-being or their options) that matters? It seems more plausible that being able to affect their situation would give you power over them. But, on that conception, one won't have a way to resist The Power View.

Defiance. Suppose your bully tells you to do some odious task. You tell them to go to hell. Such defiance reduces the extent to which you're subordinated by your bully. But it doesn't reduce their ability to diminish your well-being or restrict your options (they can still beat you up). It only reduces their ability to affect your behavior. So only the behavioral account can capture this.

Some paradigm examples of inegalitarian relationships include that of (i) King to subject (ii) Master to slave (iii) Lord to peasant (iv) Brahmin to Untouchable (v) Foreman to worker (vi) Husband to wife (in a patriarchal marriage). These relationships are objectionable in the sense that we all have a claim against being subjected to them.

Positive attitudes include deference, reverence or admiration, while negative ones include contempt, dismissal and disrespect. The view here tries to reduce inegalitarian relationships entirely to what Kolodny (2014, 297) calls "consideration."

The behavioral view was dominant among mid-century social scientists. See e.g. Dahl (1957) and Harsanyi (1962).

Plausibly, there are many notions of "power". We're trying to identify the notion which matters to inegalitarian relationships.

Frederick Douglass describes defying Mr. Covey, his enslaver, as "a turning point in [his] career as a slave...a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom" (Douglass 1847, 63). This is an especially powerful invocation of the idea that defiance strikes against domination.

Kinds of Power

Perhaps the relevant conception of power is the ability to affect behavior. But maybe not all such power inequalities contribute to inegalitarian relationships.

- **Coercion.** Maybe power only contributes to inegalitarian relationships when it is backed by violence. *Counterexample.* Suppose you invent the cure to someone’s illness. You’ll only give it to them if they do whatever you say. Here your power isn’t backed by violence. It’s not violent to refrain from manufacturing something for someone. But you do subject them to an inegalitarian relationship.
- **Well-being.** Maybe power only contribute to inegalitarian relationships when it is detrimental to well-being. *Counterexample.* Suppose you get hired as Jeff Bezos’ personal assistant. He pays you lavishly, but only on the condition you do whatever he says. Here his having power over you is good for your well-being: you get to retire in a few years with the money he’s paying you. But this is an inegalitarian relationship.

In light of this, I think an *austere* theory of inegalitarian relationships is most defensible: A and B are in an inegalitarian relationship iff A has asymmetric power over B or vice versa.

The Austere Theory

Let me make some further points about the austere theory:

- **Attitudes.** Might attitudinal disparities be an independent ground for inegalitarian relationships? I doubt it. We can explain away the association between such disparities and the relationships because (a) attitudinal disparities tend to cause power asymmetries (being deferred to give you power) and (b) power asymmetries tend to cause attitudinal disparities (we tend to respect powerful people).
- **Waiving Claims.** Teacher-student and doctor-patients relationships are ones of asymmetric power. Are these objectionable? I don’t think so. Quite generally we can waive our claims against certain kinds of treatment. If I step into the boxing ring with you, I waive my claim that you respect my bodily integrity. Likewise, we can waive our claims against subordination. Students and patients do this, and so teacher-student and doctor-patient relationships are not objectionable.
- **Children.** Child-parent relationships are clearly ones of asymmetric power. Are these objectionable? Again, no. Quite generally, children have less binding claims than adults have. Children don’t have the same kind of claim against paternalism of even to bodily integrity that adults have. You can paternalize your child and force certain kinds of medical treatment on them.

My own view, spelt out in other work, is that we should actually think of coercion in terms of equality. Coercion is wrong because the coercer subordinates the coerced.

Lovett (2010, 40, 50) describes this sort of case in terms of “golden fetters”. This case is especially probative because it shows, intuitively, that economic power can be subordinating.

One way to think of the arguments above is as follows. We start with clear examples of inegalitarian relationships (e.g. king to subject). We then explore whether there are any morally relative differences between these relationships and that between the rich and the poor. My arguments (e.g. that coercion is not critical to subordination) constitute arguments that there are not. So, if king-subject relationships are objectionable, then rich-poor relationships are too.

You don’t need to accept this to accept the argument for The Power View. That argument relies only on the idea that power (conceptualized behaviorally) is *one* component of inegalitarian relationships. That’s consistent with thinking that there are other components of such relationships.

There are of course constraints on when we can validly waive claims. We must have decent alternative options, and likely must be sufficiently knowledgeable and practically rational. But in (adult) teacher-student relationships, these conditions are usually satisfied.

I suspect the best view here is that children have more lightweight versions of all these claims than adults have, rather than that they such claims altogether. Hence our concern for their well-being should outweigh our concern for their autonomy and non-subordination.

For whatever reason children lack these claims (perhaps a lack of rational agency) they have much diminished claims against subordination.

- **Rational Persuasion.** What if someone has asymmetric power over you because they're really good at persuading you to do things? Is this bad? I think so. Two points. First, in most realistic cases, power asymmetries rooted in persuasion are not large. Usually, when we can persuade others they can persuade us, and people are anyway very good at resisting persuasion. Second, in extreme cases, persuasive power subordinates. If I can convince you to do whatever I want, that generates a problematic relationship.

For different, I think incorrect, views on persuasive power, see Lukes (2005, 35–36) and Kolodny (2014, 332–36).

Where does this leave us? Our paradigm examples of inegalitarian relationships motivate the austere theory. The cases I've just discussed provide prima facie evidence against it, but I think we can explain away that evidence. So this provides what seems to me a pretty good case for that theory.

The Deepest Problem?

So we've identified that one problem with inequalities of wealth is that they generate asymmetries of power. But is this the deepest problem?

- **Political Influence.** Wealth can give people influence of the political system. Might this be the deepest problem with inequalities of wealth? No. In the United States, wealth mainly gives people influence over politics because people can donate a lot of money to political causes. By reforming campaign financing, one would greatly reduce the association between wealth and politics.
- **Status.** Wealth gives one social status in the sense that those with wealth are often revered and admired. Might this be the deepest problem with inequalities of wealth? No. We could sever the connection between social status (in this sense) and wealth. We do this by promulgating norms that shame rather than glorify conspicuous consumption.
- **Welfare.** Wealth makes one's life better and so inequalities of wealth yield inequalities of well-being. Might this be the deepest problem with inequalities of wealth? No. First, as the levelling down objection shows (e.g. Parfit 1997), inequalities of well-being are not in themselves bad. Second, we still object to inequalities of wealth even when the rich are miserable.

In many countries, for example Denmark or Germany, wealth gives one only a very limited ability to influence policymaking. And that is because political donations are sharply restricted in these countries. The rich empirical work on these issues is partly summarized by Elkjær and Klitgaard (2021).

The focus on status and well-being can both be seen as different versions of The Consumption View. Consumption can generate both status and well-being.

How is wealth actually associated with well-being? It seems that well-being, as measured by life satisfaction or the quality of one's moment-to-moment experiences, rises with the *log* of wealth (Killingsworth 2021).

The underlying point here is that inequalities of wealth contingently cause inequalities of political influence, status and welfare. But they constitute inequalities of power more broadly. Constitution is more modally robust than causation.

The constitutive connection between wealth and power holds whenever people (1) Have ends that money can help them reach and (2) will take the effective means to reach their ends. So it holds very broadly.

Implications

Abstractly, The Power View supports policy aimed at radical material equality. We have reason to get rid of all inequalities of wealth. That includes (a)

This makes The Power View more radical than classic versions of luck egalitarianism and more recent views like "limitarianism" (Robeyns, 2017).

inequalities between middle-income and lower incomes, and (b) inequalities where the wealthy in some sense deserve their wealth. More concretely, it supports:

- **Wealth Taxes.** Governments have reason to reduce the excess wealth of the wealthy. This gives them reason to embark on wealth taxes. And the point of these wealth taxes need not be redistributive; they can be confiscatory. They needn't be about bringing up the poor; they can also be about just confiscating from the rich.
- **Welfare State.** Governments have reason to reduce the extent to which wealth gives people power. This gives them reason to build a generous welfare state. This is because when your basic needs are met you'll likely do less for money. Governments should give everyone enough money to live on in order to protect them from private economic power.
- **Homebuilding.** Governments have reason to increase the wealth of the relatively poor. How can they do this? Probably the most feasible way is to build a lot of houses and make homebuilding easier. Home-ownership is a feasible route to broadly-spread wealth.

For prominent discussions of wealth taxes, see Piketty (2014, 515–40) and Saez and Zucman (2020, 145–53, 173–76).

Distinctively, this justification for welfare states is not based on making people's lives better, but rather on protecting them from subordinating power. So it doesn't require an account of well-being that complies with any neutrality constraints.

For evidence that high rates of home-ownership are associated with wealth inequalities, see Causa et al (2019, 15–19) and Pfeffer and Waitkus (2021, 587–89).

What is the scope of these policy proposals?

- **Sweden too.** The US is very unequal when it comes to both income and wealth. Sweden is relatively equal when it comes to income. But it is about as unequal as the US when it comes to wealth. Takeaway: it's not just the US that has a big problem with wealth inequalities. Many countries we tend to think of as more egalitarian have such problems too.
- **Global distribution.** Rich people don't just have power over those in their own countries. They also have power over people in other countries. They can pay foreigners to do things too. This means global wealth inequalities create global power asymmetries. Cross-border inegalitarian relationships are bad, so we have reason to reduce global wealth inequalities.

For comparative data on wealth inequality, see Credit Suisse (2019, 117–18). For more on the weak relationship between income and wealth inequality, see Pfeffer and Waitkus (2021).

Many people (I think erroneously) take a contrary view. See e.g. Blake (2001), Nagel (2005) and Sangiovanni (2007).

Let me address one general objection to The Power View.

- **Levelling Down.** The Power View says we should level down. Is that a problem? No. It might be wholly bad to level down well-being: to make some worse-off and none better off. But it's not bad to level down power over. Reducing a slave-master's power over their slave (e.g. by freeing the slave!) is clearly good.

The point here is that whether there's anything good about levelling down depends on what we're levelling down. I think there isn't for well-being, but there is for power.

Conclusion

I've done two things in this talk. First, I've outlined and defended an austere conception of inegalitarian relationships, an understanding of them in terms of power. Second, I've used this conception to explain what's wrong with inequalities of wealth: they constitute such relationships.

The further directions for this project involve (a) spelling out and defending this austere conception in greater depth and (b) using it to illuminate a variety of further moral phenomena.

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