Wherein Lies the Immorality of Inequality?

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With the recent justification of riots, looting and arson as a moral response to inequality, I started to ask myself “why, really, is inequality immoral?”

The natural order is one of inequality of results. The cosmos does not speak to us in any moral language. The order and harmony of the spheres which we intuit from that silence contains pain, death, failure, extinction, all caused without evident remorse. The reality of the cosmos seems to be a logic of power differentially rewarding different capacities in their strivings from one day to the next.

Even the New Testament acknowledges this moral neutrality in the cosmos: “… he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the goodm and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.”
Matthew 5:45

The first inquiry might be: when we should conclude that inequality is immoral and demands both remediation for those who get less and punishment for those at fault, either intentionally or through negligence?

Do we mean inevitable inequality or only socially created inequality?

If either, do we mean inequality of wealth or of the heart/mind?

Rightly understood, capital includes both material wealth and intangible moral factors of the mind and heart. Here, we speak of personhood as capital, a sphere enveloping each of us in which there is self-possession of autonomous capabilities which can affect the future.

The author of our modern left, anarchist, fixation on inequality was Jean Jacques Rousseau. In his Discourse on Inequality, he chose the material side of life as his concern. In doing so, he perhaps inadvertently reduced all that should be meaningful in human life to that which Karl Marx would later stigmatize as the “cash nexus.”

In this, Rousseau was marching in step with Enlightenment thinking. The European Enlightenment rejected the “obscurantism” of religion, confident in the certainty of science and reason, replacing a cosmos as a moral order with one governed by a natural law of materialistic
cause and effect. Human relations were reduced to being squeezed by the will of whoever or whatever applied power to history. The Enlightenment provided no divinity offering consolation, comfort or understanding.

This materialistic mental straight jacket was then imposed on capitalism, the productive force shaping the material world from the industrial revolution onward. The scientific measurement of capitalism, its culture, society and politics, was then said by Rousseau to be equality of results.

Rousseau distinguished between two kinds of inequality: one established by nature in a person’s age, health, strength and qualities of mind and soul and the second moral or political inequality which depends on a social convention.

What is established by convention – privileges which some enjoy to the prejudice of others – being richer, more honored, more powerful, even in a position to exact obedience – Rousseau argued, can be unestablished by convention. Rousseau, thereby, established the politics of the left to depose some conventions and replace them with others imposed by the police power of the state acting in the name of the people for its presumed good.

But, then, he asserts blithely that natural inequalities can be ignored. It is even useless, he proposed, to ask if natural inequalities could ever contribute to conventional inequalities. His justification for dismissing natural inequalities was that those with conventional inequalities – the rich and powerful – might not have natural superior inequalities of mind and soul when the poor and weak might have more wisdom and virtue.

Rousseau continues, “Let us begin by laying facts aside as they do not affect the question.” He proceeded to form “conjectures,” his own idiosyncratic conventions, but not necessarily ideas informed by any truth.

Rousseau was confident in rejecting natural inequalities because however people live is of their creating and volition. Here, inconsistent with his main conclusions, Rousseau advocates the faculty of self-improvement as the cause of life outcomes. He acknowledges that individuals have agency to shape their lives after their own fashion.

Then, turning his back on human capacities, Rousseau asserted that people in a state of nature have no moral relations and cannot be good or bad. Egoism did not exist; people just are. Morality must wait for civilizing to happen. Social habits and methods of living bring about diversity within human communities, something artificial. Rousseau says that civilization “made man wicked while making him sociable.”

The first man who having enclosed a piece of ground bethought himself of saying “This is mine’ and found people simple enough to believe him, was the real founder of civil society. From this came crimes, wars, murders, horrors and misfortunes now a love of well-being is the sole motive of human actions.”

Thus, from enterprise come differences in outcomes, comparisons, feelings of preference. People in civil society realized that if others would work for you, you could progress faster, so hierarchy was established, property was introduced, metallurgy and agriculture produced more property and desire for property gave rise to laws and justice. “The privileged few gorged themselves with superfluitities while the starving multitude are in want of the bare necessities of life.” Equality disappears. Inequality becomes necessary for civil living.
“Law bound fetters on the poor and gave new powers to the rich which destroyed natural liberty and fixed inequality, subjecting all mankind to perpetual labor, slavery and wretchedness.” Political distinctions led to civil distinctions, but all distinctions originate with wealth.

The spirit of society and the inequality which society produces transforms and alters our natural dispositions. From inequality of fortunes and conditions arise prejudices.

People learned to want others to promote their advantage. Such “ambition, thirst of raising fortunes, inspired men with a vile propensity to injure one another. These sentiments and intentions led to growing inequality, usurpations by the rich, robbery by the poor which suppressed natural compassion and the feeble voice of justice.”

Thus, again, Rousseau actually turns to morality and not materialism as his way of judging the outcomes of inequality – it is wrong because it institutionalizes a loss of compassion and of the moral preference which grounds our instinct for justice in our human, non-cosmic, realities.

Now Rousseau betrays himself again by crediting natural inequalities – strength of body, quickness of mind – with bringing about discriminations among people – having some end up with more than others.

So, even with these admissions against interest, Rousseau insists that we measure justice by material criteria, not moral ones. Yet, is it not prima facia immoral to ignore morality?

If inequality is to be immoral, then it must violate some norm of morality which encompasses more than materialism.

We have no logic or insight revealing when the material becomes infused with morality.

The criteria of fault is moral and it is personal. When is a person at fault? Does either poverty or wealth ever make a person guilty of a fault? Are the poor never at fault and the wealthy always in the wrong?

We have entered the theater where character struts forth across the stage of history – intent to do harm, negligence, depraved indifference and failure to overcome cognitive biases. So, we must now ask how materialism does or does not determine personal character if we are to use materialism as the criteria for judging the morality of inequality.

Materialism can indeed influence the socialization of people, condition their emotions and shape their personalities. But people have an internal moral sense thriving independently from their conditions. They have agency to rise above circumstances or bend underneath their weight.

Then, we must judge between the just and the unjust, the evil and the good, among the wealthy and, separately, among the poor. Wealth is not necessarily a sentence of evil or injustice, nor is poverty necessarily a sentence of good or justice.

We have arrived at a conclusion that each and every individual must be judged individually according to a moral compass, not by their wealth or poverty. It is not wealth that matters, but conscience. Even in capitalism, in which moral capital often can be outcome determinative, as it directs the risk management of stakeholder relationships for better or for worse.
Thus, inequality is not per se immoral. And violence and destruction cannot be justified as means to overthrow some just to elevate others. Clausewitz told us that war is only politics by other means. So, violence and destruction – acts of war – are special political means to create new hierarchies of inequality. As political acts, they need to be screened against moral criteria.

As Napoleon the pig in Orwell’s *Animal Farm* put it, “All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.” How such superiority is used becomes the question.

There is a morality which binds all, no matter wealthy or poor, strong or weak, of high status and low and that is love, mercy, compassion or in Latin, *Caritas*. It is even more expected of those who are more equal than others. One phrase is that “rank has its responsibilities.” It is the expectation of stewardship on the part of those with wealth and power. It is the standard of doing equity with the power in your hands.

Depending on the moral quality of the person, power can be used for good or for evil. The outcomes of inequality, therefore, may vary depending on the persons responsible who have more wealth and power than others. If materialism is taken as the essence of inequality and morality ignored, then it becomes harder to achieve real justice.

The joinder of materialism and morality comes closer when it is equality of opportunity that the scales of justice must measure. Opportunity is found at the intersection of material possibility and human purposing. Opportunity challenges individuals to bring forth out of themselves moral, social and human capitals with which to shape their circumstances. But laws and institutions must be responsive to such individual initiative and let it achieve results. The social order, as Rousseau said, can hinder or assist our efforts at self-improvement.

In an open society, those who inherit wealth or social status may use their gift well and sustain such advantages or they may fail in life. It often happens that good character does not come pre-installed at birth. Those high born often fail to become good people and thoughtful citizens. It is said that families can go from “shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves” in three generations.

In open societies, there is a constant circulation of families in and out of the elite.

Not every society, however, is open. Caste distinctions, ethnic differences, religious sectarianism, one party dictatorships and cronyism in politics and the economy all impose systemic denial of opportunity on some.

These systems of disparate outcomes violate the moral norm of equality of opportunity. But their fault is a moral one, not one to be measured by material outcomes alone. Disparate outcomes justify a search for causes – what explains such differences? What laws stand in the way of self-improvement for some in the society? What social practices prevent recognition of the talents and possible contributes of some? Who, when empowered to open society up to opportunity does not do so, either with intent or through negligence? There, then, is a causal agent of inequality of opportunity.

But when opportunity is not prevented by the laws, where special opportunity is provided through quotas and affirmative actions, where financial systems take in savings without discrimination, where schools are available without charge, but disparate outcomes continue, how can we understand the origins of such inequality?
When systems deny opportunity to those who seek it or place difficulties in the path of some, but not others, so that life outcomes are unequal, who should shoulder responsibility for such results? That depends on the system, as Karl Popper pointed out many decades ago. Open systems behave differently from closed systems.

Open systems decentralize and distribute decision-making and so, too, the power of agency. They follow the principle of subsidiarity. Open systems have flow and are flexible, modular and constantly evolving new forms and new circumstances.

To the contrary, closed systems are centralized, reject subsidiarity, concentrate power in a few hands, impose cultural norms, reprimand and even punish unorthodox thought and behaviors and are intolerant of personal agency.

In the open system, responsibility, too, is decentralized. Because individuals are more capable in such systems of taking advantage of opportunities, they shoulder a proportionately greater burden of responsibility for outcomes.

It is the reverse in closed systems. There, those in authority have principal responsibility for the outcomes experienced by those subordinated to them. When changes seem warranted, the system, acting through its appointed agents, must be first in line to respond.

When seeking to assign responsibility in cases of failure and disappointment, sometimes to place blame on some for what happens to others, a moral dimension is to first look to oneself for shortcomings before harping on the flaws of others. This concern for what is more spiritual than material leads to dynamics of forgiveness, reconciliation and solidarity in common cause.

When thinking of the “other,” Jesus gave us the parable of the “Good” Samaritan. Shakespeare put it that the quality of mercy should not be diluted, considering that it “falleth as the gentle dew from Heaven” and “becomes the throned monarch better than his crown.”

Buddhism, too, gives priority to the moral and spiritual over the material in characterizing another. In Buddhism, releasing the mind from the influences of the Kleshas or upsetting mental perturbations should come before making judgments on who should be held responsible or blamed. The 10 Kleshas are: greed (lobha), hate (dosa), delusion (mohā), conceit (māna), wrong views (micchāditthi), doubt (vicikicchā), torpor (thīnaṃ), restlessness (uddhaccaṃ), shamelessness (ahirikam) and recklessness (anottappam).

To place the material over the spiritual is more likely to draw forth retribution and anger as the appropriate communal norms. Thus, does materialism activate its bias towards centering our lives in the rawness of power. As Thomas Hobbes described it, this leads us to lives which are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”

When vengeance and retribution are proposed to punish individuals when systems fail, I recall Yahweh’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Old Testament justice. Abraham pleaded with him to defer vengeance in order to spare those without guilt.

Anarchist rage against systems reminds me of Captain Ahab in Melville’s novel Moby Dick, seeking revenge on the white whale for being only what it was meant to be. The only human survivor of Captain Ahab’s unforgiving pursuit of Moby Dick spoke words from the Book of Job – “I only am escaped alone to tell thee.”
The *Tao Te Jing* similarly warns, “To do the killing for the great executor is to chop wood for a master carpenter. And you would be lucky indeed if you did not hurt your own hand.” (#74) Because “Humility is the root from which greatness springs.” (#39)

When we are to consider what justice requires when inequality of outcomes is too distressing, is it not the better course to first provide the moral and material assets necessary for the dispossessed to benefit from opportunities before them?