

An aerial photograph showing a stark contrast between a lush green golf course on the left and a densely packed shanty town on the right. The golf course features manicured lawns, sand traps, and scattered trees. The shanty town consists of a vast number of small, makeshift dwellings with corrugated metal roofs, packed closely together. A line of trees separates the two areas, highlighting the social inequality.

World of Difference

A Moral Perspective
on Social Inequality

A red decorative shape with a jagged, sawtooth-like edge, located in the bottom left corner of the cover.

Amsterdam
University
Press

Compiled by Naomi Ellemers

World of Difference

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A Moral Perspective
on Social Inequality

Compiled by Naomi Ellemers
Edited by Belle Derks,
Félice Van Nunspeet, Daan Scheepers
and Jojanneke Van der Toorn

AUP

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‘Income inequality is the “defining challenge of our time”. ... we ... trust our institutions less (and) trust each other less when there’s greater inequality’

President Barack Obama (December 4, 2013)

‘Inequality is the root of social ills.’

Pope Francis (November 24, 2013)

‘... the economics profession (has) downplayed inequality for too long. Now all of us have a better understanding that a more equal distribution of income allows for more economic stability, more sustained economic growth, and healthier societies with stronger bonds of cohesion and trust.’

Christine Lagarde, Director, IMF (January 23, 2013)

‘Social and economic inequalities can tear the social fabric, undermine social cohesion and prevent nations from thriving. Inequality can breed crime, disease and environmental degradation and hamper economic growth.’

Ban Ki-Moon, UN Secretary General (July 9, 2013)





1

Social inequality: Myths and facts

Naomi Ellemers

Open your eyes

Life is unfair. In many large cities, opulent homes can be found right alongside poor neighbourhoods. The new medicines that pharmaceutical companies develop are so expensive that many people can't afford to use them. And while some people work all hours to get their job done, many others cannot find employment. Inequalities also characterize the lives of people in different countries. In some parts of the world, families flee hearth and home to survive; in others, people feel unsafe because they fear being burgled. Ice rinks are constructed in the middle of deserts for the entertainment of some. Yet many others are helpless in the face of natural disasters that destroy their homes and endanger the provision of food.

We can all see that social inequality exists and that it creates problems. But it is less clear what *causes* such inequality. Do

1.1

Rawls' veil of ignorance

Gwen Van Eijk en Sabine Roeser

What happens when two children have to share a cookie? It depends. Chances of getting an equal division are best when one child divides the cookie and the other is allowed to choose first. This is less likely to happen when one child divides the cookie and gives part of it away. This example illustrates the point of a famous thought experiment designed by philosopher John Rawls to explain the 'veil of ignorance'. Imagine that no one knows what his or her preferences, abilities or position in society will be – because this is covered by a veil of ignorance– what kind of society would we want to live in?

This thought experiment invites us to think about fairness, equality and justice. Those who choose to have a society that is very hard on people with few abilities or who are born into a group with a low social status, might suffer if they happen to end up as someone with few abilities or belonging to a low-status group. This way of thinking thus helps us transform self-interest into general interest. A similar principle underlies insurances: everybody contributes an equal share, not knowing who will be the one needing a smaller or larger payment or nothing at all. This justice principle can be threatened when insurances refuse to accept people who are considered high risk (e.g., because they suffer from a chronic illness), or give discounts to those who are unlikely to undergo costly medical treatments (e.g., students).

different outcomes simply reflect differences in capabilities and priorities? Do they result from diverging choices? Is it a matter of chance that some people are lucky while others suffer misfortune? So are some people often lucky while others encounter misfortune every time? How can this be? What are the consequences of these inequalities? Can they be ignored, or should we try to tackle them; and if so, how? In the public debate on social inequality different kinds of explanations are offered, for instance by journalists or politicians. Scholars who engage in this debate tend to address specific issues, or only consider their own disciplinary perspective. With all these competing analyses being put forth, it is easy to lose heart and conclude that the origins of social inequality are so complex that a solution is out of our reach. We thus tend to close our eyes to the inequality that exists, because we don't see how it could be resolved. We assume it does not matter what we do; we hope that things will be sorted out in the end, or we trust others to take care of them. These are all missed opportunities. We need to acknowledge the problems we face before we can address them, for they will not be resolved by themselves. If we do nothing, things will only get worse. Because it truly matters what we do – or fail to do.

How?

This book aims to shed new light on the debate on social in-

equality. We brought together academic experts from a variety of disciplines to examine this issue in depth. Throughout the book, we take a moral perspective (see Box 1.1): What is fair? What kind of world do we want to live in? By taking these questions as our starting point and combining knowledge from different academic disciplines, we evaluate the conceptions held by the public against scholarly knowledge in order to separate facts from myths.

This book captures our collective insights in an integrated analysis. The consequences of social inequality are made visible in photographs and statistics, because we have to face reality, however unpleasant it may be, instead of turning a blind eye. In this book we explain why many measures are not particularly effective, and draw on scientific knowledge to elucidate what kinds of solutions are necessary and feasible.

Resolving social inequality seems a daunting task, because it touches upon different areas of life. When we think about social inequality, we tend to focus on the differences between people, for instance in income and living standards. But such differences are closely linked to other important life outcomes (see Box 1.2), such as health and life expectancy or educational level and career opportunities. Social differences also play a role on a larger scale, for example in the movements and absorption of migrants, or in the way we use our natural habitat and deal with ecological hazards.

Common roots

Richard Wilkinson

We tend to think that inequalities in different areas – in health, education, or opportunities for children – are separate problems. They are often discussed as injustices requiring different remedial policies. But although many policies which would improve health would make little difference to education and vice versa, it is essential to recognise that most of the problems routed in relative deprivation also share some powerful common causes.

Most of the problems which within any society are more common lower down the social ladder, get worse when differences in income and wealth between rich and poor get larger. Basically, problems related to social status get worse when social status differences get bigger. As a result, countries with wider income gaps between rich and poor have higher rates of a range of social problems (such as homicide rates and level of mental illness) compared with more equal countries (see Figure 2).

This pattern is partly explained by the way bigger income differences increase the scale of relative deprivation. But although inequality has its biggest effects among the poorest, it leads to worse outcomes across all sections of society. That is because bigger income differences make class and status – social position – more important throughout society. Those with lower status are eager to climb, and those with higher status are fearful to lose their status. Status anxiety increases in all income groups and, as status competition increases, social relations, community life and our willingness to trust others declines.



In this first chapter, we examine common assumptions and popular solutions. We critically assess what tends to be seen as the main cause of social inequality, and what kind of solution this seems to require. Is this analysis well founded? Are the explanations commonly put forth substantiated by scientific facts, or are they myths that must be debunked before we can tackle the real causes of inequality?

Myths and facts

Myth 1: Economic growth is always good.

A growing economy creates many opportunities. This is most clearly visible when the starting point is highly unfavourable. In developing countries, for instance, economic growth can improve access to food, education, and health care. But where such basic provisions are already available, further economic growth can also have negative effects. There are often costs associated with economic growth; for example, because natural resources are depleted or harm is done to the environment. A singular focus on increasing a country's Global Domestic Product (GDP) can easily overlook this. In various countries, including the Netherlands, increases in GDP per capita do not necessarily improve national wellbeing, as indicated by the state of education, work, health, security, or the environment (see Figure 1). Moreover, further economic growth is often accompanied by increasing inequality. Those who already have a signifi-

1.3

Moral reasoning: For better or worse

Frank Hindriks

Morality matters to how people decide what to do. This is to a large extent because people have a desire to act in accordance with the moral norms they have adopted. And they are prone to notice discrepancies between what they want to do and their moral norms. In spite of this, people often end up acting in harmful or otherwise immoral ways. How can this be?

Even though virtually everybody engages in moral reasoning, people often do so in a self-serving manner. When they are tempted to do something harmful, they find ways of justifying the action to themselves, or to excuse or exonerate themselves. How can it be wrong to take home office supplies when 'everybody is doing it'? Sexual harassment is often justified in terms of the clothing someone wears, i.e. by 'blaming the victim'. Engaging in military combat

becomes significantly easier when civilian casualties are euphemistically labelled as 'collateral damage'. Where do things go wrong? Morality matters in that people register moral discrepancies and often feel guilty already prior to performing a harmful action. Ideally, people subsequently refrain from performing this action and change their plans so as to conform to their norms. When, however, this is not the case, they may arrive at the conclusion that, in spite of appearances, it is permitted to act in the preferred manner. What is particularly striking about such self-serving moral reasoning is that, as a consequence, people rarely believe of their own actions that they are bad. In this way, as the psychologist Albert Bandura famously noted, people are able to 'behave harmfully and still live in peace with themselves'.

cant amount of wealth and many opportunities benefit the most from economic growth, while this is rarely the case for those with little wealth and few opportunities. Without policies that level out such discrepancies, economic growth can easily induce greater inequality, which in turn is linked to a number of negative societal outcomes (see Figure 2).

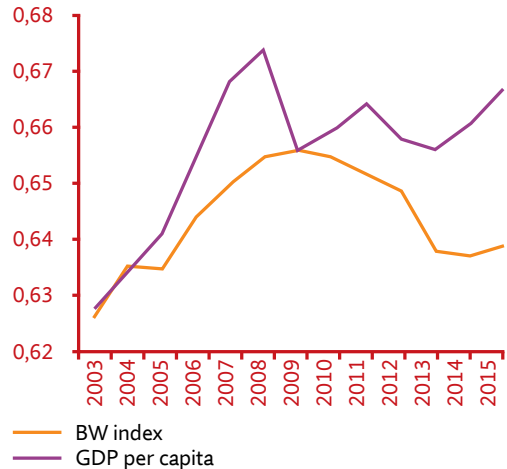
In its 2014 report 'Off the Deep End', the Institute for Policy Studies noted that income disparities in the US increased during the recovery from the most recent economic crisis. On Wall Street, bonuses were already the same as or even higher than before the crisis, while the minimum wage in the US had remained unchanged in all those years. Clearly, not everyone benefited from the economic recovery.

Nowadays, more and more people are aware of these facts. And yet economic and social policies are still based on the implicit assumption that economic growth is always good. Hence, it is commonly believed that we should support companies and people that can ensure growth, for example by allowing tax exemptions or by supporting them with taxpayers' money.

Why is the myth of economic growth so persistent? Of course, in a growing economy it is easier to maintain that everyone will be better off in the end. This allows us to ignore the fact that there is a small segment of the population that clearly benefits most from a growing economy. Those who insist that growth is always good are in fact justifying

Figure 1

GDP per capita and wellbeing (the Netherlands 2003-2015)

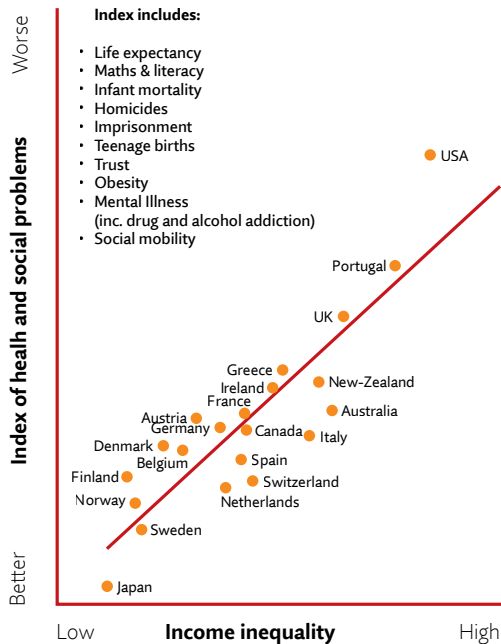


BW index includes indicators of 11 dimensions indicating the state of health, safety, environment, education, income, employment and working hours, housing, civic and community engagement, following OECD taxonomy of better life index.

Source: Netherlands beyond GDP: A Wellbeing Index. Institutions for Open Societies, Utrecht University and Rabobank Economic Research. December 21, 2016.

Figure 2

Health and social problems are worse in more unequal countries



Source: Wilkinson & Pickett, *The Spirit Level* (2009)

economic choices that leave many people worse off (see Box 1.3).

Myth 2: Equal rights provide equal opportunities.

Legally anchoring equal rights and enforcing such laws can help to curb inequality, but it is only a first step. Providing equal *rights* does not mean that people actually enjoy equal *opportunities*.

Factors such as social class, gender, and ethnicity all play a role in the opportunities that people get, regardless of their abilities, rights, or choices. When we assess people's accomplishments, we may form different expectations of their strengths and weaknesses merely because they look or speak differently than we do. We do this unintentionally and often unwittingly. Yet it can have far-reaching effects. This has repeatedly been demonstrated in studies where identical letters and CVs were submitted in response to a job vacancy. Merely changing the names of candidates resulted in a different assessment of their achievements and potential, even though the statement of their qualifications was identical.

We assess the ambitions and achievement potential of different individuals differently, simply because of who they are and where they come from. These first impressions make us more willing to give some people the benefit of the doubt, even if this is based on unfounded expectations.



We generally tend to seek, consider, and remember information that confirms our first impressions. This makes it difficult for people to prove their actual worth, especially if the first impression we have of them is not very favourable. Those who belong to a group that has had little success in society are also disadvantaged in another way. Success not only reflects *the things you can do* but also depends on *the people you know*. It is easier to show your worth when you know someone who can introduce you to relevant decision makers. It is much more difficult to convince others of your qualities if there is no one to show you the way or help you get started. The formal right to equal treatment does not compensate for this.

1.4

Mainstream economics is not value-neutral

Irene Van Staveren

The economist John Maynard Keynes wrote in 1936 that economics is a moral science. But today, most economists regard their discipline as value-free and objective. This view is defended with the distinction between economic analysis and economic policy implications: the second is considered moral, concerned with what ought to be, whereas the first is considered neutral, concerned with models, calculations, and statistical data. Economists working in the tradition of Keynes or other traditions outside the mainstream disagree with this view. We claim that economic analysis is not nor can be morally neutral. First, *economists* are not morally neutral: recent research has shown that political attitudes of economists relate to the type of research they do and the policy advice they provide.

Second, the evaluative criterion used for markets is efficiency. This is a moral value and is concerned with the minimization of waste. The *exclusive focus on efficiency* implies neglect of other values such as equality, security or sustainability.

Third, mainstream economics assumes that all economic agents strive to *maximize their individual utility*. This implies an exclusive focus on maximum outcomes with minimum use of inputs, which should lead to efficiency in a fully competitive market context. This approach is limited because it does not allow for redistribution between agents in order to maximize aggregate utility.

Fourth, real-world economic agents often do not maximize utility – they either follow certain moral principles and social norms, or they make choices following emotions, instincts, or instructions.

Fifth, there is increasing evidence showing that efficiency and equality are not trade-offs but that a more equal distribution of resources tends to improve efficiency. Hence, policies such as free education or affordable health care insurance for all, benefit human capital and labour productivity. This leads to higher levels of income and wellbeing, which is regarded as efficient by economists of all types, and can be expressed in terms of GDP growth.

Myth 3: People only change when this benefits their self-interest.

Attempts to influence human behaviour are often guided by the assumption that people pursue economic gain. For instance, our strong faith in the blessings of the free market is based on the notion that people make rational choices aiming to maximize their profits. Government policies rely on financial incentives and sanctions to influence companies and organizations. Managers at these companies and organizations rely on similar mechanisms in guiding the behaviour of citizens, clients, and employees. All these parties are treated as separate individuals who rationally try to maximize their own outcomes and pursue their own interests. Yet many economists have identified alternative models that offer an equally valid or even superior understanding of human motivation (see Box 1.4).

The implicit assumption that people are self-interested individuals who are primarily driven by the pursuit of profit maximization also impacts on the way in which we deal with social inequality. We often tell each other that income differences are necessary in order to induce people to perform well. Reductions in welfare benefits are often justified in this way. It is assumed that the opportunity to earn more money offers an important incentive for people to seek employment. But is this the only reason why people work? If it were, how could we explain why so many people free-

ly donate their time and efforts to do volunteer work? The importance of high earnings is also cited to justify top salaries in the corporate world. If the pay were not competitive – so it is argued – the most talented workers would move abroad. Yet we see that many talented people are reluctant to move to another country because they value other aspects of life, such as the national culture or their ties with family and friends. These examples show it is too easy to assume that people always seek economic profit and will do anything to achieve this.

At the same time, we know that there are important drawbacks to motivating people in this way. Research has established that the use of competitive incentive schemes and performance systems elicits untruthful reporting of performance results and misbehaviour. The prospect of financial gain is also seen as an important root cause in recent cases of large-scale fraud, such as the diesel-emissions software scandal or the fixing of LIBOR interest rates in banking.

What, then, would be a viable alternative to approaches based on economic profit maximization? Why do people change their behaviour if this brings them no material gain? Research reveals that there are other factors besides self-interest and rational choices that guide people's behaviour. For instance, the choices they make are also informed by their identity, by the emotions they experience, or by the motivation to do what is morally right (see Box 1.5). In dif-

ferent studies, the desire for *equality* emerges as a relevant concern. Common interests, similar goals, shared values and experiences, and empathy and care for each other are all strong motives that can lead people to transcend their own interests. In fact, a basic behavioural motive is implied in the need to belong and to be respected and valued by others who are important to the self (see also Box 4.4). Empathy and care are also important drivers of human behaviour. People are willing to make all kinds of sacrifices to achieve such goals, often acting in ways that seem to make little sense or appear to be irrational. In order to understand this kind of behaviour, we must take into account that people cannot simply be considered individual actors who act rationally to maximize their own benefits. They are also social animals who look to each other for respect, support, and guidance.

Myth 4: Social unrest only reflects discontent over personal outcomes.

We live in an era of social unrest. Young people are eager to find work and to have their own home, but they are unable to support themselves. Migrants abandon everything they know and love in search of a better future. They end up in countries where people worry whether there are enough employment and housing opportunities for all. No wonder, then, that people rise up in protest.

1.5

Convincing people to change their moral behaviour

Naomi Ellemers and Félice Van Nunspeet

Research shows that people have a strong motivation to consider themselves as moral persons. They try to do what they consider morally right, also if this means that they have to abandon their personal preferences. The desire to be moral is a very important motive –people attempt to do what is moral, even when they know this will make them seem less friendly or less smart.

The drawback of this desire is that people find it aversive to consider the ways in which their behaviour may be lacking in morality. When we monitor their brain activity, we see that people carefully attend to their moral lapses. When we consider their physiological stress responses we see that they are quite upset by their moral shortcomings. Yet when we ask them to explain what they did, they tend to justify their behaviour, or deny its moral implications. Why? Precisely because they care so deeply about being moral, confronting people with their moral short-

comings easily induces a sense of threat and raises defensive responses. Hence, insisting that their behaviour is lacking in morality may not be the most productive way to get people to *change*. It only makes them unhappy, hostile, and defensive.

How can we use this knowledge to convince people to change their moral behaviour? Feelings of threat are alleviated when people are explicitly invited to *improve* their moral behaviour. Asking them to focus on the moral ideals and possible solutions to achieve these, helps them engage and plan for ways to be more effective in doing what they consider to be morally right.

Further, people are most likely to do what is moral when their behaviour is monitored by others who are important to them. They hope to earn respect and social inclusion by acting in ways that are morally approved by these others.

On the surface, it would seem that the forces driving social unrest and political protest relate to people's frustrations about their own outcomes and prospects in life. For example, the people who joined the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement described themselves as 'the 99 per cent'. This was intended to emphasize the distinction between the majority of people and the richest one per cent in the US, who earn disproportionately more than the rest.

But other indications suggest that income disparities are not the main reason that people revolt. Indeed, the Occupy movement was not only directed at differences in income, but also at the disproportionate *influence* that the richest one per cent have on politics. People protested against the fact that the interests, wishes, and preferences of such a small group dictate the systems we develop (or fail to develop) to work together, live together, and show solidarity in caring for each other. Even those who benefit from current arrangements can see that for many people, the system is not working. The protests that are voiced also reflect such broader concerns and moral ideals.

A case in point is the attitude towards migrants. Countering common beliefs, research shows that the reluctance to accommodate more migrants is *not* primarily driven by individual concerns over economic outcomes. As we will see in Chapter 4, attitudes towards migrants mainly relate to uncertainties about our ability to deal with cultural differences, instead of

1.6

Identity threats and the stability of social hierarchies

Daan Scheepers

Why is it so difficult to reduce social inequality? Research has addressed the role of (physiological) threat implied by the prospect of change.

This work shows that when power differences are *stable*, the powerless show signs of threat. They display a maladaptive pattern of high blood pressure, accompanied by high vascular resistance, and low cardiac performance. When power differences are *unstable*, similar threat is shown by those in power. This helps to explain why people in power may be reluctant to reduce social inequality. For them, social change implies losing their privileged position.

These dynamics not only play out at the individual level, but also at the group level. They are visible not only when 'real' material resources are at stake but also when status differences are more symbolic.

This is not always evident from what people say. Physiological signs of threat to unstable status relations may emerge even among those who endorse

egalitarian views. For instance, when discussing changing gender roles in society, males showed increased blood pressure, especially when discussing this with a woman. However, under these circumstances their endorsement of explicit sexist statements was reduced. Thus surface level openness to social change can co-occur with the experience of threat, which may impede the propensity to engage in *real* action towards changing gender roles.

Is there hope? Research shows that members of dominant groups *can* become positively engaged by the prospect of social change. Both their explicit attitudes and their physiological responses indicate they feel positively challenged by the possibility of change, provided that they see such change as a moral ideal, rather than as a moral obligation. Emphasizing the moral ideals underlying the desire for social change may therefore be key to achieving this.

reflecting a sense of competitiveness about economic resources. The notion that migrants have other moral values is what people find the most disturbing; in general, people believe that such differences in important values are difficult to reconcile. Accordingly, they fear that the influx of migrants will call into question moral values that are important to them, and will alter the principles that govern society. In developed countries, more abstract concerns such as these constitute the main cause of social unrest (see also Figure 7).

From problems to solutions

Although having some form of social inequality is inevitable, it is still worth considering the causes of such inequality, as well as its consequences. Once we recognize that commonly held assumptions are in fact myths, we gain a different perspective. Taking a novel perspective to examine familiar problems yields a different level of understanding and brings to the fore other types of solutions.

Debunking common myths is important; it causes us to ask different questions and to examine novel solutions.

If economic growth is not the silver bullet that many people consider it to be, we need to look further. This allows us to examine what choices are actually being justified by prioritizing economic growth. Who is rooting for this, and why?

We have also argued that equal rights only constitute a first step towards creating equal opportunities. If this is the case,

1.7

Morality and unjust inequality

Neelke Doorn and Pauline Kleingeld

This book takes a moral perspective on social inequality. This prompts the immediate question what morality is. Morality refers to the set of most fundamental rules and values that provide guidance on how one ought to act. Different ethical theories take different points of departure to articulate the relevant criteria. According to some theories, the criterion for right action is formulated in terms of the *outcomes* of one's actions; according to others, what matters most is that one acts on the right underlying *principles*. The first type of theory is called 'consequentialist', the second 'deontological'. For consequentialist theories, an act is considered right if it leads to better overall outcomes, for example if the well-being of people improves. In a deontological framework, an act is right if it is in accordance with a good principle or an appropriate value. Although consequentialist and deontological theories are fundamentally different, they may overlap when it comes to concrete duties. For example, leading con-

sequentialist and deontological theories hold that individuals have a moral duty to help people in need and to promote general well-being.

Both consequentialist and deontological theories may consider social inequality as undesirable or wrong. From a consequentialist perspective, if reducing inequality improves the total amount of well-being, inequality should be reduced. From a deontological perspective, reducing inequality may be required because equality itself is considered of value, for example, or because an equal distribution is considered more fair. Not all moral theorists regard all forms of social inequality as necessarily unjust, since some inequalities may be the result of genuinely voluntary decisions (for example, a personal preference to adopt a minimalist lifestyle). Thus, morality requires us to reduce *unjust* inequalities. This book explores what different inequalities may be at stake in the different domains and which ones should be considered unjust.



we must ask ourselves what we can do to offer everyone the same opportunities, instead of simply attributing different outcomes to individual choices and achievements – as we so often do.

And if people not only seek to differentiate themselves from others, but also have the desire to belong, this may be used to help them change their behaviour.

Finally, it helps to know that social unrest also reflects people's anxieties about the threat they experience to the *values* that are important to them, and to the moral principles they endorse. This knowledge implies that we should not consider economic outcomes alone, but that we also need to reassure people about the moral implications of current developments in society.

The structure of this book

The chapters in this book address the causes and consequences of social inequality by taking an often-overlooked perspective that goes beyond individualistic economic approaches. We view individuals as part of a collective or as members of a social group. We also consider the possibility that some groups have an interest in the maintenance of social inequality, while others aim to reduce it (see Box 1.6). In performing this exercise, we examine the added value of taking a *moral* perspective. Key questions are whether people are treated equally, and if not, whether we can arrive at

a more equitable distribution by using the power of moral arguments – i.e., the desire to do the right thing (see Box 1.7). The first two chapters focus on the novel insight this perspective yields into the way in which inequality impacts on *education* and *work*. We also consider the effects that inequality can have on our *health*. The inequality between various groups in society is discussed in the chapter on *migration*. In the final chapter, we examine how taking a moral perspective changes the way we consider the inequality between different parts of the world with regard to the causes and effects of *climate change*.

For each of these subjects, we examine the added value of taking a moral perspective. When each of us pursues our own interests, this does not make the world a better place for everyone. Increasing the inequalities between people living together in the same society carries significant costs and introduces risks that affect us all. We examine the implicit mechanisms that play a role in this process. In turn, these illustrate that the use of economic incentives that make people optimize their own outcomes does not resolve the problems identified here. The only way to combat social inequality is to recognize that opportunities are not the same for everyone. Only when we ask ourselves how we can ensure that everyone is treated fairly can we begin to understand what we need to do.

