

## **DG Response to ‘interrogations’**

Thanks for very helpful and interesting input. I was most impressed by the quality of the comments. Together with earlier input I received from EOW, they convince me that I need to do some further refining, though I do remain committed to the basic argument.

If that is okay, I’m going to respond to the student interrogations in conjunction with responding to some of Erik Olin Wright’s earlier input and, as you will see, there are points of connection between some student comments and points EOW made to me earlier.

Regrettably I can’t reply to all students in their own right, and some get more mention than others due to my particular thematic sorting of issues. I hope that when I do mention students I represent them accurately and fairly. On a few occasions I was not fully sure about what point was being made, so put the comments to one side for further and later consideration.

### **Class**

#### ***Class: a social construct?***

Ben Killbarger’s suggestion that class, like race, is socially constructed and thus a problematic concept is challenging, especially as it applies to standard of living class. There is certainly much that is (for example) culturally relative about material standard-of-living metrics. I remain comfortable, though, with the thought that (i) we can use a standard of living metric of some sort, since, whatever its culturally shaped content in particular societies, all human beings seek to satisfy certain basic and other material needs, and (ii) that their satisfaction is one condition of human flourishing. Moreover, (iii) some material needs are universal and constitute near-absolute imperatives.

#### ***Class or stratum?***

Killbarger’s piece (‘Why does Glaser talk about a standard-of-living class, as opposed to standard-of-living simpliciter?’) also left me wondering whether it is right to call a standard of living ‘level’ a class, as opposed to, say, a stratum. ‘Stratum’ seems the more neutral and logical way of specifying a ‘level’ within a system of stratification, and comes with less baggage attached than does class. But I want to hold on to the term class, because standard of living (as associated with, for example, wealth and income) forms one common idea of the basis of class, and is an idea commonly invoked, if only implicitly, when thinkers or activists juxtapose race to class. That is to say, what they have in mind is something like the difference between rich and poor, as opposed to biological or cultural race.

I should mention at this point that EOW persuaded me to use the term standard-of-living class, as opposed to what I originally had in mind, namely wealth and income class. I think that what EOW had in

mind in advising this change was that the (in my terms) 'intransitive' and actionable goal was a certain standard of living outcome, rather than a list of means to obtaining that outcome, especially since wealth and income doesn't exhaust the list of means.

### ***Production class/property class***

I should also raise here production class which EOW had comments on, but (interestingly) none of the students. I had in mind with this term the Marxist conception of class rooted in ownership and control (or lack thereof) of the means of production. EOW suggests that it is more accurate to refer to the classes referred to by Marxism as *property* classes. Ownership, he is suggesting, is crucial to class under Marxism, and indeed it underlies control. My reservation is that I want the differentiators to be at least potentially neutral in their implications for hierarchy; to be the sort of category that different social arrangements might use in different ways with different implications for the hierarchies. To refer to a property class is to refer, by definition, to a place in the wealth and income hierarchy, which belongs in the list of hierarchy categories, rather than in the list of differentiators. But I suppose that referring to the hierarchy category as a standard of living class, as opposed to wealth and income class, clears the way to putting property class in the differentiator list in a way that avoids logical difficulties. That is, it leaves open the question of what precise implications private property in the means of production has for standard-of-living, status and power hierarchies.

I am still inclined, though, to have a category in the differentiator list that refers to different places in the authority or control system within economic enterprises e.g. workers, managers. I had originally thought of production class as encompassing both the ownership and control categories, but perhaps it is best to treat them as distinctive differentiator categories, each with their own potentially different roles in social arrangements and implications for distributive outcomes.

### ***Distribution strata as differentiators***

Horn makes the point that standard-of-living class can itself function as a differentiator in terms of status and power ... and one could add that (say) power has implications for standard of living and status. I agree. I think this means that hierarchy groups in general can also figure as differentiators, and that hierarchy groups have implications for each other. I don't think this presents a problem for my argument, as long as I can hold on to the premise that interpersonal distributions of standard-of-living, status and power are what really matter in egalitarian-normative terms.

## **Gender: differentiator or form of hierarchy?**

Schouten and Grigg (and perhaps Alfonso, if I understand her correctly) make points which echo one made earlier made to me by EOW, concerning the treatment of gender as a transitive, non-eliminable, not-inherently-hierarchical category. I think what both EOW and Schouten are saying is that gender, as opposed to biological sex, is a category that already has oppressive implications and so should be

considered for 'elimination'. I can see the point here, and am still deciding how to respond to it. There are some counter-considerations.

First, is gender difference inherently oppressive, or is it open to being celebrated in the name of difference? Why, for example, do many talk favorably of 'gender diversity'? Not even all feminists treat gender difference as inherently oppressive, and not all consider it eliminable.

Second, if we want to specify what is wrong with caste or gender, we would still want to 'cash that out' in terms of standard-of-living class, status and power implications. Like caste or even property class, it is a differentiator that could be argued to have definitionally negative distributive implications and to be eliminable, ie, to belong in these respects to an exceptional subcategory within the differentiator column. But they may still be worth retaining in the differentiator column, because different social arrangements will 'use' them in different ways, with different distributive implications. Thus gender might play a more crucial differentiating role in Pakistan, caste in India, than in any number of other societies where these categories operate.

Third, if gender is oppressive, is its oppressiveness specifically of an inegalitarian kind? For example, it could be argued that the social pressure to play out gender roles oppresses everyone equally, denying everyone equally a right to personal self-determination or personal fulfillment. At any rate, this might be the way in which it would continue to oppress even in the absence of standard-of-living, status and power hierarchies. But then is this a specifically distributive issue? My paper is not a contribution to discussions of how to eliminate all ways in which social life can be oppressive, but specifically to discussions of how to eliminate oppressive inequalities.

Finally, even if I were to remove gender from the differentiator column, I would still need a way to refer to what is commonly meant by gender in discussions of (in)equality. There is no doubt that when people talk about gender equality, one of the things that most of them have in mind is intergroup inequalities between men and women in terms of access to income, economic and political power, etc. This commonly invoked meaning of gender remains vulnerable to my critique of intergroup equality, since men and women might be aggregately equalized even as societies become more interpersonally unequal.

Maybe what I need is a fuller discussion of gender, differentiating its different connotations and meanings, just as I do with class.

## **Race as a social construct**

Ben Killbarger points to the socially constructed nature of race. This fits with my idea that particular social arrangements 'make use' of race in particular ways, with particular implications for hierarchies. In that sense I hope I avoid essentialising race, or (as Tatiana Alfonso worries) reducing it to its biological meaning.

## **Groups *versus* individuals**

### ***'Ontology of atomic individuals'?***

Miriam Thangaraj asks whether I'm not falling back on an 'ontology of atomic individuals'. Let me clarify where I stand on this. I think human beings are social animals, and recognize that for many of them their group identity is the most important identity they have. But what is the measure of whether particular group associations are doing individuals good? It is precisely whether as individuals they benefit from these associations. Even in posing the question I cannot but fall back on a morally individuated language ('whether as individuals they benefit'). Is this a liberal element of my thinking, or is it a fact that no one can logically avoid this way of posing the question? Any other way lands you in logical trouble, or at least in deeply uncomfortable scenarios (e.g. scenarios where groups are flourishing but everyone in them is miserable). Humans may live and act in groups but their individual flourishing (including their subjective wellbeing) is the measure of whether we should normatively 'approve' of their associational lives or not.

### ***Do groups have moral worth?***

I was intrigued by Kevin Cunningham's suggestion that species have no moral worth, only individual members within it. (I think he was agreeing here with my basic normative premise.) This has implications for ecologists and animal rights advocates. An ecologist might see normative value in conserving a species, even if it means physically eliminating (say) an imported members of an alien species predated upon it, or even more dramatically, culling members of a species that ecologists want to preserve. An animal rightist might condemn this as a morally instrumentalist (and anthropocentric) approach that illegitimately terrorizes, tortures and kills individual animals in the name of preserving eco-diversity or otherwise being environmentally 'good'.

One might also (returning to humans) ask whether it would matter, morally, if human beings ended their own species through free individual choices i.e. if all human beings voluntarily chose not to procreate. If it is okay for one individual not to procreate, how can it be problematic when the right is exercised by individuals severally? Again, does it matter morally if a language dies out because all its speakers freely choose not to pass it on to their children? I tend to favor pro-choice answers to these questions but a devout Catholic or a language rights activist would likely come to a different conclusion.

## **Democracy and power**

Tatiana Alfonso seems to be saying that I neglect what she calls equality in terms of civil rights (as exemplified in political participation. I'm not sure I fully got the point, but just to say that in my scheme power includes 'power to' and power as self-determination. So I am interested in the interpersonal distribution of capacity for political participation.

## Extent of equality: on maximin

Noting that I make allowance for a Rawlsian maximin – that is to say, inequalities are permissible to the extent that they benefit the least advantaged – Noel Howlett asks at what point the poor will be judged to have made enough gain to merit egalitarian support for the (unequal) social arrangement they are part of. I think the answer can only be answered at the level of the principle itself: at that point when the poorest are better off than they would be in any other social arrangement. When that point is reached is a matter of judgment that will be influenced e.g. by one's understanding of economic theory and history.

## On equality

Catherine Willis asks whether there are important social differentiators beyond class, status and power. She cites the case of Quebec, where the French Quebecois are now at least as well off as other Quebecois, certainly in standard of living, perhaps also in power and status, yet there is still differentiation in terms of heritage, language, culture and politics. There are several ways to look at this. This might be a case simply of freely expressed non-hierarchical differences that do not matter in egalitarian terms (but of course could be problematic in other terms). It might be that French Quebecois want self-determination (e.g. so that they have a space to preserve their own culture), and consider themselves definitionally unequal in power or status to other Canadians until such time as they have a state or self-governing entity of their own. It might be that French Quebecois self-assertion has come to be about protecting collective *privilege*. These are possibilities that would have to be investigated, but I don't think they threaten my argument. From an egalitarian standpoint, living standards, status and power still remain the relevant yardsticks in normatively evaluating the situation.

Miriam Thangaraj points to the situation where untouchables convert to Buddhism or Christianity even though this does not change their economic situation and may leave them worse off in status terms. I wonder about the latter description of the situation. Surely this can be described as an assertion of *dignity*, which relates at least to self esteem (and I include in status the *bases* of self esteem). Also I wonder if it is not a claiming of *power*. The conversion could *conceivably* provide no economic, status or power benefit, but then I think it simply becomes neutral or irrelevant to an egalitarian debate – and underlines that equality is not the only good that matters to people.

## BEE

### *Is BEE meant to be egalitarian?*

Catherine Willis questions whether I'm right to look at BEE in terms of egalitarian criteria. It's a fair question – is the egalitarian justification merely a smokescreen? I suspect quite a few 'realists' will argue this. Normative theorists take ideas and justifications seriously in their own right, rather than assessing

them merely as (say) sociological or discursive effects. This approach may be naïve, but then again sometimes people's ideas really influence their actions and are not reducible to their interests. Moreover normative theorists are interested in establishing whether justifications are plausible – the discovery that they are not might constitute (inconclusive) evidence that interests are the real drivers. And challenging an ideology or discourse on its own proclaimed terms can be quite politically effective.

### ***Politics and measures of progress in the struggle for equality***

David Calnitsky takes what looks like a kind of progressivist-teleological Marxist line – multiracialising the different classes is good, because it will clarify underlying class contradictions. I have no desire to challenge this as a political strategy, though I have reservations about it as one. But whatever strategy one adopts, one still needs to be clear about one's guiding normative ideal. To hope that underlying class contradictions are exposed is to hope that they are attacked and removed – a hope guided by a normative yardstick of some sort.

I think Kelly Robbins is saying something similar: that narrow BEE represents moral progress because it is a step on the way to interpersonal equality. I can grant that, if it *is* a step – a strategic question, I guess. She also says that it is in any event better than what came before i.e. the coincidence of race and class inequality. I grant this, *ceteris paribus*. But other things may not be equal. What if racial equalization is accompanied, not by unchanged levels of interpersonal equality, but by deeper interpersonal inequality? What if, contrary to Calnitsky's hope, multiracialising the class structure stabilizes the unequal social system, rather than exposing its underlying class contradictions to attack? What if, as Howlett suggests, it undermines a cross-racial class solidarity that is necessary for further social transformation?

Piko Ewoodzie is in the same territory when insisting that I underestimate the importance of my own insight that the social differentiations are crucial to mobilization against inequality. Perhaps, but my greater concern is to stress the different *kinds* of importance the differentiators and distribution strata enjoy – and to underline that the importance of the latter resides in its providing a normative metric for distributive justice. Calnitsky, Robbins and Ewoodzie are all inviting me to pay closer attention to the politics. This may be salutary, or it may be inviting me to write a different paper!

### ***Affirmative action***

J. Edward Connery poses the challenging question of whether the critique of BEE doesn't also apply to affirmative action. It surely does, up to a point, and I've perhaps chosen too easy a target in BEE – perhaps AA is the really hard case! There is however one egalitarian defence at AA's disposal that is not at the disposal of narrow BEE: AA may benefit an 'elite' in some sense, but it is a much broader elite or 'middle class' than the one benefited by N-BEE. AA redistribution stands to have a relatively greater positive effect on interpersonal distribution.

### ***Questions about BEE***

On Alex Hyun's donation point: the suggestion that the black elite might donate more to the black poor than whites do. I'm happy to grant this.

To respond to Paul Gibbons, microfinance is vulnerable to my critique to the extent that it produces interpersonally inegalitarian outcomes. I'm no expert on this, but need it?

I'm not sure how to separate out targeting BEE as a tool and in terms of ignoring class ... I guess I'm saying that the N-BEE tool neglects class.

Eunhee Han asks a range of empirical questions around BEE, and I don't have the info at my fingertips to answer them adequately. My reading of the evidence is that narrow BEE does reduce intergroup asset inequality, but not interpersonal asset inequality. BEE is not directly concerned with building capacity among black adolescents. It doubtless leaves some whites worse off than they would otherwise be (and subjects some white individuals to injustice), but of course in aggregate whites remain privileged.