

# Material inequality and political theory essay example

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## **Material Inequality and Political Theory**

Defining inequality and determining factors to assume equality and justice remains to be a vague concept as factors like social class, talent, and needs would often influence how people define these terms. According to Fleischacker (2005), adding to the confusion of defining inequality and means to attain 'just distribution' of goods, services, and rights are several definitions and theories established to try and attain 'just distribution'. With the presence of several theories and definitions to attempt explaining how just distribution can be done, concerns on how it would impact society is raised since political theories vary in concentration and how inequality can be resolved. Since there is a lack of common consideration with the available political theories discussing material inequality and just distribution, it is important that political theories respond to material inequality by taking into consideration three aspects that can serve as an outline: the rights of people, the threshold on how equal distribution is attained, and the issue of compensating for those who claim injustice or material inequality.

According to Schutz (2011) material inequality is the main concern of distributive justice, the philosophy discussing how fair distribution is attained. In a further explanation, Keren-Paz (2007) and Fleischacker (2005) stated that distributive justice, or social/economic justice, entails equal distribution to members of society both benefits and burdens that would correspond to the person's needs, capacity, and social class. The theory also discusses as to how people should allocate both benefits and burdens or their resources without the need of competing for resources, especially with resources being limited in some instances. For years, the definition of

distributive justice and material inequality had transformed throughout the years to include the necessity of a criteria for material/resource distribution and determine factors to identify item value to correspond to a person's capacity. Fleischacker stated that currently, distributive justice calls on to states to guarantee that property or materials are distributed throughout society equally under a certain level. However, just distribution would need to take into account the quality of the material to distribute, the quantity of each type of good, and how it would influence the entire social system.

Keren-Paz, on the other hand, cited that distributive justice can be summed up to three points: members of society, the resources/materials to be distributed, and the criteria used for the distribution. Participants may revolve small groups or even the society in entirety, which is why it is a necessity to understand how distributive justice would influence these participants. In terms of the material to be distributed, distributive justice must take into regard the nature of the goods, whether they are services, rights, burdens and benefits; and how distribution can be allocated under the legal rule. Finally, the criteria for distribution under the distributive justice literature identifies which system should be used for distribution.

It may seem that under the three points of outlining how distributive justice works, the possibility of resolving material inequality is plausible. However, given that political theories have sprung left and right to give their own interpretation of just distribution and material inequality, people are still left distraught on which interpretation should be taken into account. Schutz stated that the reason for the influx of applications plausible for distributive justice is due to the nature of the morality of material inequality. One may

question when a person would be deserving of an unjust resource without clearly violating the legal norms, or if the criteria used for just distribution is correct. In this case, Schutz and Lamont and Favor (2013) cited some principles that attributes one or all three criteria on how material inequality is to be taken into account: according to one's merit, according to one's contribution, and according to one's need. The first principle, just distribution based on one's merit refers to the individual's worthiness. In this end, people would be seen rightful for the materials or resources provided to them due to their skills and behavior. It would then be natural for society to reward its members accordingly, and any individual who is not rewarded would be seen as an unjust treatment. The second principle, inequality can be resolved by undermining how each person contributes to society and then allocate resources to match their contributions. While there is no need for markets to determine " values" of resource or materials that can be given to the person in question, market systems are often designed to ensure peaceful distribution. Finally, distributive justice can be done by basing one's share of the resources through their needs. Each person, under this principle, would need to contribute to society using their skills and talents and would receive resources based on his or her needs. This enables social efficiency and self-fulfillment because this would enable people to understand the value of their needs and capacity.

Although the three given principles of distributive justice provides a semblance on how material inequality can be resolved by basing just distribution through one's merits, needs and skills; there is a necessity for political theorists to take into consideration three important aspects: the

rights of people, the threshold on how equal distribution is attained, and the issue of compensation. Meyer (2008) defines all three aspects on how equal distribution must be taken into account under the banner of intergenerational justice. For the first aspect, Meyer stresses that there is a need to understand the notion of how the rights of each person- past, present, and future- would play on the system that would define just distribution and material inequality. Currently, Vanderheiden (2011) cited two objections when it comes to the rights of people that must be taken into consideration when it comes to material inequality. The first objection pertains to the uncertainty surrounding the stances, needs and preferences of the future generation that may be different with the current needs, stances, and preferences of the present generation. Since the present generation has to take these perceptions into account, it is likely that they may not be able to make reliable predictions on how their set of just principles would affect the future or the present. In the example provided, the present may presume the possible damages resources like uranium would affect the future generation upon the end of the lifecycle of power plants in the near future. However, this does not take into account the possible developments in the future that may overlap these consequences. Uncertainty then lingers when it comes to the allocation of obligations, especially for shared resources, for both present and future claimants. Regardless of this, it is crucial to take into consideration the fact that while obligations to the future generation would be concentrated on avoiding bad consequences and fair allotment of materials/resources, it may complicate present actions and determine its actions on just distribution.

The second objection pertains to the idea of non-identity raised by Derek Parfit, which concerns the claim that actions done now would impact the future persons. Kumar (2003) stated that the non-identity problem influences the moral convictions on how a person should be classified to be wronged – may it be due to inequality or the like. There is a necessity to understand the wrongdoer's conduct in determining if they could live up to the responsibilities set for them and still sustain their obligations to those who have been done wrong. He cited Parfit's non-identity problem as the argument wherein a person's claim to have been done wrong would require a psycho-physical identity should not be seen in its normal state instead of wrongdoing conducted. In the case of large-scale present actions, the plausible consequences may be influences on how the present actions are executed and influence the conception of future persons. Since it is difficult to identify all possible impacts of present actions based on the welfare of people, Parfit argues that any present action may harm the future people that would be influenced by present actions. Parfit also states that any action done on a resource or service, like siphoning all of the world's oils to deprive the future oil reserves, may not necessarily be harmful to the future persons as they would live in different environmental conditions.

Parfit, as stated by Clark (2006) and Miklos (2013) also argues that people do not value equality like other egalitarians, but it is notable that there is a reason on why priority must be allotted to the least advantage. In his 'levelling-down objection', Parfit states that people have the right to choose between distribution of wealth and income that is equal with the others to distribution that is less equal but would benefit the least advantage. He also

added that people would always have a reason to prefer such material inequality because of the difference of each person. Parfit had also argued that equality has no influential weight as a distributive principle because there will always be a time wherein people would bow down to the less fortunate for them to gain the resources not easily attained by those in their class.

John Rawls had also provided his own definition on how the rights of people should be seen in understanding material inequality. Arguably the most influential theorist on social justice and in the issue of distributive justice, as noted by Castillo (2011), Rawls had modified himself from the rest and proposed that each person is incapable of dishonoring the notion of justice that even welfare would not be able to influence as a whole. In his proposal, according to Freeman (2007), Rawls also proposed a principle of “just savings”, which enables people to understand intergenerational sufficientarianism that highlights a person’s obligations to the future people. Rawls believes that since it is unfair for the less advantaged to sacrifice their obligations and benefits for the sake of others, it would mean that earlier generations would find it unfair if they would have to let go their good for the sake of the future generations. It is also argued that without a just savings principle, the difference principle would just mean that nothing must be left for the future generation and just ensure that the status quo is retained. If the present generation saves resources for the future generation, the present generation would then take the benefits that can be given to the less advantaged and cause material inequality. Rawls also insistent on the just savings principle because it showcases how important a just society is

required to ensure continuous endurance of each generation. There must be a kind of reciprocity in the part of the present generation to sustain the just institutions inherited for the future generation. The just savings principle then shows, according to Rawls, the welfare of the future generation must be taken into regard because it would also influence the burdens and the resources that can be given to the future generation.

In addition to understanding the rights of all people, it would enable political theories to identify as to the limits of one's responsibility can be stressed.

Tremmel (2006) cited that responsibility itself is limited due to its cost, power, and restrictions. In the first aspect, responsibility may be undermined by the cost of taking over the responsibility for a specified subject or action. The second aspect pertains to the capacity of responsibility to connect itself to either subjective or objective power that would enable it to influence events or intervene in events given their capacity. Finally, restriction of one's foresight limits the idea of responsibilities because not all are capable of escaping troubles or mistakes given the circumstances faced by each person. Understanding these limits in responsibility would then enable people to assign future responsibility that may be comprehensive and role-transcending through the years. What may influence the assignment of future responsibility would be the objections of the 'present generation' that may not have a long-term effect to development.

The next criteria that must be taken into account for political theories to respond to material inequality is the definition and identification of thresholds that would encompass all persons. Meyer (2008) suggested several thresholds that would encompass various considerations. For



egalitarian considerations, standards on identifying equal minimal rights to people would be dependent on two ways; the standing of people relative to their capacities and the average level of well-being of the current generation that would influence the well-being of the future generation. In terms of prioritarian reasoning, equality does not matter in identifying just distribution. For this reasoning, the threshold to take into consideration is the fact that 'Benefitting persons matters more the worse off the person is to whom the benefits accrue, the more people are being benefited and the greater the benefits in question.', similar towards the egalitarian condition. Under the prioritarian version, it also entails how future people are affected by actions unless they are well off like stated prioritarian view. The next threshold to consider is the sufficientarianism, which curtails the same standards as the first two thresholds on equality, however, it can be distinguished through weak and strong sufficientarianism. Weak sufficientarianism prioritizes people below the threshold of zero, attributing a particular weight and demand to determine their state of well-being and the goods they can attain. In the case of strong sufficientarianism, people would be seen as well-off if they are just below the threshold, highlighting that the more people are benefiting from the system, the better the benefits are given.

John Rawls also has his own criteria on how just distribution can resolve material inequality. Arnold (2009), and also Rawls (2008), outlined that justice can be attained by creating a perceived situation or the original position, which would run a virtual simulation of how interests would be influenced based behind the veil of ignorance. Arnold also stressed that the

veil of ignorance entails the equal distribution of individual rights since no one could influence the creation of principles. Once principles of justice are established, added by Corradetti (2011) it would lead to the creation of the justice as fairness principle that would now lead to two principles: each person is free to gain basic freedoms and if inequalities are to be organized in the extent that it would benefit the less fortunate. Catlett and Firestone (2009) then stated that with the principles of justice listed, individuals would now have the power to use the concepts to enact the laws. The theory also outlines that the “justice as fairness” theory would also enable parties to show their true emotions in the matter to help in the distribution process. Fear, in itself, may appear in individuals that may be seen “less advantaged”, which is why there is a necessity to understand how political theory can handle situations like this.

Finally, political theories may be able to respond to material inequality better by understanding how the idea of wrongdoings and compensations would influence the course of just distribution. Sher (2005) cited that it is often perceived that compensation is owed by some due to the effect of certain wrongdoings that had transpired generations ago. In this end, it is also perceived that compensating someone would just cause someone to become well-off than usual. This cycle could then be attributed to the wrongs of the generations passed and make them well-off. Since compensation remains to be an intangible idea, the challenge now is to understand if those who have been descendants of those who have been done wrong would not have existed if the mistake has not been done. Sher stated that with this challenge, people and political theories fail to take into consideration the

essence on how a person could not have exited if a wrong was not made that fostered material inequality. In this end, there is a necessity the obligations given to the people and would not destroy the goods that is inherited or owed to understand the nature of compensation

As the world continues to change and resources continue to lessen or increase in price, the necessity of having a political theory to respond to material inequality is crucial as further inequality may cause further conflict within the society. A political theory responding to material inequality must take into consideration the rights of people - may they be from the past or from the future - if they deserved the duties, resources and burdens imposed upon to them or if their lives should be considered for the future. Knowing the rights of the people is also essential to understand the limits of each person and how their skills and capacities come into play. Political theories must also respond to material inequality by exhibiting workable thresholds on how equal distribution is attained. While there are several theories discussing possible ways on how equal distribution or inequality is attained, it must take into regard the nature of the person involved as well as the fact the distribution must comprise all decisions and to all people. Finally, there must also be a discussion on how compensation must be taken into consideration. Compensation may affect how societies deal with just distribution of resources as supplies may dwindle in number given that there will be people who would have much more resource than they are supposed to have. All three aspects must be taken to consideration as it would allow people to understand how both just distribution and material inequality

would be understood easier and to ensure that each person is given due process and right to attain what is rightfully theirs.

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