

PART II

FAIRNESS AND INEQUALITY

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The next six chapters explore the problem of fairness and inequality in American society. Inequality is central to moral concerns in thinking about social institutions. Nearly everyone thinks that certain kinds of inequality are unfair. In contemporary American society, for example, few people would defend inequalities in legal rights based on race or gender or religion. There are other kinds of inequalities that most people feel are just facts of life and are not of any general moral concern. There are great inequalities in physical strength among people, and while this may matter in some contexts, few people see this inequality in and of itself as morally troubling. And, of course, there are inequalities whose moral standing is deeply contested. Consider the following:

- In 2007 the average CEO in the United States earned 400 times [check figure] the average nonmanagerial employee.
- While women make up nearly 45% of the labor force, they fill only X% of top management positions. [check figure]
- Young African-American men are six times more likely to be in prison than white men of the same age. [check figure]
- Roughly one out of five children in the United States live in poverty.
- The probability of the son of a manual worker becoming professional is X% that of the son of a professional.

To varying degrees, the claim that each of these is an example of an unjust inequality is contested. These disagreements are linked to disagreements over the underlying explanation of the specific inequality: if the explanation for why women are less represented among top managers is simply that they freely choose other kinds of career paths, then many people would conclude that there is nothing unfair about the inequality of outcomes; if young African-American men commit six times more crimes than young white men, then their disproportionate imprisonment might not be viewed as reflecting an injustice; if the children of manual workers are less academically talented or motivated, then many people would feel that there is nothing unfair in their having a lower chance of becoming a professional. But the contested quality of judgments about the fairness of inequality may also depend upon underlying philosophical views about what makes an inequality fair or unfair. Many people would argue that it is unfair for a CEO to earn 400 times an ordinary worker even if this pay differential is the result of free market competition and meritocracy, and that it is unfair in a rich society for children to live in poverty regardless of the explanation for why their parents lack adequate income.

In this part of the book we will explore the kinds of inequalities in contemporary American society that raise moral issues of fairness and injustice. We will begin in

chapter 10 by clarifying what we mean by fairness and its relationship to the problem of social and economic inequalities. Chapter 11 will then explore a particularly salient concept in the analysis economic inequality, class. Chapter 12 will examine the empirical patterns of poverty, wealth and inequality in the United States today, and discuss the alternative explanations for these patterns. Chapter 13 will examine possible remedies to both extreme inequality and poverty in the U.S. Chapter 14 and 15 will shift our attention from economic inequalities to inequalities rooted in what sociologists call “ascriptive characteristics” – characteristics that a person is born with. Chapter 14 examines racial inequality in the United States, briefly charting its historical development and variations, paying particular attention to the deep connection between racial inequality and class. Chapter 15 explores the dramatic transformations of gender relations since the middle of the 20th century and the remaining forms of gender inequality which pose challenges today.