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Equality and Hierarchy

JONATHAN WOLFF

HOSTING AND PUBLISHING TALKS IN PHILOSOPHY SINCE 1880

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UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

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B I O G R A P H Y

Jonathan Wolff is the Blavatnik Chair in Public Policy at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford. He was formerly Professor of Philosophy and Dean of Arts and Humanities at UCL.

His recent work has largely concerned equality, disadvantage, social justice and poverty, as well as applied topics such as public safety, disability, gambling, and the regulation of recreational drugs, which he has discussed in his books *Ethics and Public Policy: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Routledge 2011) and *The Human Right to Health* (Norton 2012). His most recent book is *An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (Norton 2018).

Earlier works include *Disadvantage* (OUP 2007), with Avner de-Shalit; *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (OUP, 1996, third edition 2016); *Why Read Marx Today?* (OUP 2002); and *Robert Nozick* (Polity 1991). He has had a long-standing interest in health and health promotion, including questions of justice in health care resource allocation, the social determinants of health, and incentives and health behaviour. He has been a member of the Nuffield Council of Bioethics, the Academy of Medical Science working party on Drug Futures, the Gambling Review Body, the Homicide Review Group, an external member of the Board of Science of the British Medical Association, and a Trustee of GambleAware. He writes a column on higher education for the *Guardian*.

This year's Presidential Address marks the official inauguration of Helen Beebe as the 110th President of the Aristotelian Society.

E D I T O R I A L N O T E

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EQUALITY AND HIERARCHY

JONATHAN WOLFF

Hierarchy is a difficulty for theories of equality, and especially those that define equality in relational or social terms. In ideal egalitarian circumstances it seems that hierarchies should not exist. However, a liberal egalitarian defence of some hierarchies is possible. Hierarchies of esteem have no further consequences than praise or admiration for valued individual features. Hierarchies of status, with differential reward, can, on this view, also be justified when they serve a justified social purpose and meet conditions of genuine equality of opportunity. However, group hierarchies remain problematic, and, it has been argued, they are pervasive in human societies above a subsistence level of production. It has also been argued that group hierarchies are impossible to eliminate, and enormous cost is associated with attempting, and failing, to remove them. However, the perspective of ‘real-world’ political philosophy allows measures to mitigate group hierarchy, starting with those that are either the easiest to address, the most damaging, or the most consequential.

I.

Introduction: Social Equality and the Problem of Hierarchy. Contemporary discussions of equality fall into two broad camps. Some theorists argue that equality should be understood in distributive terms, and that the primary philosophical task is to determine what it is that should be distributed equally to everyone within the scope of the distribution (Dworkin 1981, Sen 1980). This is the question of the ‘currency’ of egalitarian justice; a term introduced by G.A. Cohen, who writes: ‘I take for granted that there is something which justice requires people to have equal amounts of, not no matter what, but to whatever extent is allowed by values which compete with distributive equality’ (1989, p. 906). In contrast, others argue that the essence of a society of equals concerns relations between people, rather than the distribution of things. This view, known as relational or social egalitarianism, has become associated with philosophers such as Anderson (1999) Scheffler (2003), Schemmel (2011), and Kolodny (2014). I have defended it myself (Wolff 1998, 2015a, see also Fourie et al 2015). It is also clearly present in the work of David Miller (1997) and Richard Norman (1997), and, further back, R.H. Tawney (1931) Matthew Arnold (1894 [1879]) and many others in the socialist tradition. Some recent philosophers have argued that the two approaches can be

reconciled, perhaps if the currency of justice is regarded as respect or status (Stemplowska, Z, 2011, Tomlin 2014, Lippert-Rasmussen 2016). An alternative reconciliation is that considerations of distribution and social relations are independent aspects of a complete vision (Fraser 1995, and, for a different approach Scanlon 2018).

My task here is not one of reconciliation, but rather to consider how the social view should respond to the thorny question of social hierarchy. On my view, the question is intrinsic to the task of understanding the nature of social equality. It is not a simple matter to explain what it is for a society to be constituted by egalitarian social relations. Of course, we would expect individuals to treat each other with courtesy and respect, but that is also consistent with societies that we would regard as deeply unequal, such as those advocated by ‘one nation’ conservatives in a tradition introduced by Disraeli (2008 [1845]).

In trying to define social equality David Miller writes that a society of equals is ‘a society that is not marked by status divisions such that one can place different people in hierarchically ranked categories, in different classes for instance’ (1997, p. 224). He adds

In objecting to inequality, we are objecting to social relations that we find unseemly – they involve incomprehension and mistrust between rich and poor, for instance, or arrogance on one side and forelock-tugging on the other. (p. 225)

Yet, he also observes, ‘It is possible to elucidate the ideal of social equality in various ways, but difficult to give it a sharp definition’. (p. 232)

The difficulty, I believe, is not simply a failure of imagination, but intrinsic to the issue itself. And my feeling is that, in good dialectical fashion, in this case the solution is latent in the statement of problem. Rather than seeking a unique account of relations that constitute a society of equals, we should focus instead on the relationships that render our society socially unequal. Elsewhere, I’ve argued that when thinking about equality, we can gain much more focus by considering the negative: inequality (Wolff 2015a). Michael Walzer remarks ‘egalitarianism is abolitionist’ (Walzer 1983, p. xii). Iris Marion Young’s ‘five faces of oppression’ are a good start on what social egalitarians should oppose: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence are all relationships that stand in the way of social equality (1990, see also Anderson 1999), although as Kolodny notes, many of these are also objectionable independently of any concern for equality (2014, p. 296). Further additions will be briefly noted later in this paper, although it is not my purpose here to try to be comprehensive. To start, though,

it seems obvious that all egalitarians, and especially social or relational egalitarians, should be critical of hierarchical social relations.

This observation immediately leads to another methodological issue, the distinction between ‘ideal-theory’ and ‘non-ideal theory’, or, in my preferred terminology, ‘real world political philosophy’ (Wolff, 2015b). There are many ways in which this distinction can be drawn (Stemplowska and Swift 2012, Valentini 2012), but for the purposes of this current discussion I want to emphasise three elements. First, and what is most distinctive in the contrast, ideal theory tends to be relatively context free, setting out principles or theories that are expected to apply generally, whereas real world political philosophy starts from an account of how the world is at a certain time and place, and what changes may be possible and desirable, given where we are. Second, ideal theory may or may not take into account facts of human psychology and motivation, whereas real world political philosophy must do so, if it is to be realistic. And finally, although, again, ideal theory can do this too, real world political philosophy, in the version I adopt, is relentlessly concerned with the longer term consequences of changes, and in particular, how the world would react back. For example, it is common to suppose that the solution to a problem is a new law or regulation. Yet if this new measure is generally felt to be wrong-headed in some way, many people may attempt to get around it so they can continue to do what they want without breaking the law, or, at least, getting caught. This can have consequences that are worse than the situation before the introduction of the new law (Wolff, forthcoming).

It follows from the distinction between ideal and real-world philosophy that even if there is a strong case in ideal theory for the absence of hierarchies, it does not follow that it is the correct thing to do in our society, full of hierarchy, is to attempt to abolish them. It may turn out to be impossible, given human nature or motivations, or far too costly in terms of how people would respond. Hence, as I will explore in the final section of this paper, we will also need to look at ways of mitigating hierarchy.

However, when I have stated my general opposition to hierarchy in the context of presenting my work, I am often confronted with the response that surely I don’t think all forms of hierarchy are bad, even at the level of ideal theory. True, this question is much more often put to me by the senior Professor than a junior lecturer, but that fact alone is not quite enough to discredit it. My task here is to look at this question more deeply, and to consider whether or not it is possible to distinguish forms of hierarchy that are consistent with the idea of a society of equals, and those that are not.

The key issue is easily stated. Social egalitarians oppose hierarchy because, first, it seems problematic in itself, and second it reinforces other forms of inequality. These other forms run from oppression, such as the ‘five faces’ identified by Iris Marion Young already mentioned, to lesser, though still significant, evils such as snobbery and servility, which so troubled Tawney. Hierarchy is associated with power, privilege and prestige, and, much importantly, their converse. Sidanius and Pratto use the term ‘social value’ which, for convenience, I will adopt here (1999). But it is important not to forget the underlying content of social value and disvalue. Murray Bookchin observes that ‘a hierarchical mentality fosters the renunciation of the pleasures of life. It justifies toil, guilt, and sacrifice by the ‘inferiors’, and pleasure and the indulgent gratification of virtually every caprice by their ‘superiors’. (2005 [1982], p. 72).

Yet it is also sometimes argued that some forms of hierarchy are either unavoidable, tolerable, or even desirable. Can we provide ways of sorting hierarchies into the acceptable and the unacceptable? And can we prevent undesirable side-effects as we attempt to reduce or eliminate hierarchies? These are my questions here.

II.

The Manifestation of Hierarchy. It is all too easy to come up with examples of social hierarchy: the class system in Britain and elsewhere; racial and gender inequality in virtually all contemporary societies; the caste system in India;¹ and many analogous structures. However much we preach against it, in our actions and attitudes we tend to reinforce social hierarchy. Michael Walzer, for example, writes:

Equality literally understood is an ideal ripe for betrayal. Committed men and women betray it, or seem to do so, as soon as they organize a movement for equality and distribute power, positions, and influence among themselves (1983,p. xi).

In a similar vein, Johan Galtung, the founder of peace research, noted that Mao and Gandhi were ‘both so dominant in their organizations that it probably was not too meaningful to speak of real egalitarianism’ (1969, p. 188). We see similar observations over a very wide range of literature. The anarchist anthropologist Harold Barclay notes that hierarchy tends to exist even when there is no formal political authority. He identifies four common types: The Big Man; The Technician; The Holy Man; and The Old Man (1982). The inevitability of the emergence of hierarchy is widely

¹ It has been argued that caste system in its notoriously rigid form was introduced by British colonial rulers (Dirks 2002).

accepted in psychology and anthropology. (Boehm 1999, Sidanius and Pratto 1999, Freud 1982 [1929/1930]).

The liberal view, which I shall discuss in the next section, argues that hierarchies of reward can be justified, but only when they serve an assigned, socially needed, function. They broadly echo the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen: social distinctions can be founded only on the common good. Yet is it far from obvious that this is how things are generally regarded. Adam Smith suggested that there are four factors ‘which naturally introduce subordination, or which naturally and antecedent to any civil institution, give some men some superiority over the greater part of their brethren.’ Smith’s categories partially overlap with Barclay’s mentioned above, but are not identical. He lists ‘personal qualifications’, ‘age’, ‘fortune’ and ‘birth’. The first may sound reasonable, but, so Smith says, no society has in fact ever established its rules or precedence on this basis. (2007 [1776], pp. 550-3). Indeed, Michael Young’s *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, was intended as a dystopian portrayal of what such a society would look like (1958). The second, age, as long as it is ‘short of dotage’ he adds, has always been treated as a material factor in granting precedence especially in traditional, and, we might add non-literate, societies. This could have a functional justification in terms of wisdom and experience. The third, fortune, by which Smith means wealth, grants power at certain levels of development of society, although Smith optimistically seemed to believe that its influence was on the wane. Perhaps fortune, especially self-acquired fortune, could sometimes be taken as a proxy for personal qualifications, but as we know this is far from universally the case. And finally, birth has enormous effects, especially when combined with fortune.

Understood in these terms, hierarchy seems to be a matter of more or less, at least in the societies we have experienced. But some societies seek to reinforce it, while others seem embarrassed by at least some manifestations and take steps to avoid it. Just as R.H. Tawney, regarded snobbery and servility as enemies of equality and sought to eliminate them, others have seen equality as the threat and have done their best to perpetuate snobbery and servility, disparaging the intellect, capabilities and entitlements of the ‘lower orders’ and expecting automatic deference. For just one example, Matthew Arnold quotes the historian James Froude as remarking that ‘the natural leaders in a healthy country are the gentry’ (1894 [1879], p. 38).

There can be little doubt that contemporary societies too are shot-through with relations of hierarchy, even if they may sometimes be more implicit than explicit. Murray Bookchin helpfully distinguishes hierarchical *relationships* from hierarchical *sentiments* (2005 [1982], p. 67). Often, they will go together though they need not. Hierarchical sentiments may

exist even where there is no relationship, as in, for example, a typical member of the British public's attitude to the Royal Family. And it may be that a hierarchical relationship can exist with one or both sides being blind to it; indeed, this may be rather common for those in the higher position, especially if they profess egalitarian views. Nevertheless, hierarchical relations are often encoded into patterns of behaviour of what is done and what is not done. In his study of Malaysian independent farmers, James C. Scott noted that hierarchies were marked through visiting relations: it was much more common for the poor to visit the rich than vice versa (1985, p. 3) We see this everywhere. A meeting with the university's Vice-Chancellor is much more likely to take place in the VC's office than yours. If it was suggested that the VC should come to you, this will be unnerving and make you think it is an inspection, rather than a normal business meeting.

Marilyn Frye has incisively developed a related theme, that of access:

Differences in power are always manifested in asymmetrical access. The President of the United States has access to almost everybody for almost anything he might want of them, and almost nobody has access to him. The super-rich have access to almost everybody; almost nobody has access to them. The resources of the employee are available to the boss as the resources of the boss are not to the employee. The parent has unconditional access to the child's room; the child does not have similar access to the parent's room. Students adjust to professors' office hours; professors do not adjust to students' conference hours. The child is required not to lie; the parent is free to close out the child with lies at her discretion. The slave is unconditionally accessible to the master. Total power is unconditional access; total powerlessness is being unconditionally accessible. The creation and manipulation of power is constituted of the manipulation and control of access (1983, p. 103).

Some markers of status could be arbitrary. We could have developed conventions in which the poor are visited by the rich. But the patterns Frye uncovers are not like that, for in this case the markers of power both manifest and consolidate that power simply through the way they work. But my point is simply that social hierarchies are real, pervasive, and reinforced through habitual actions that are rarely questioned, especially by those who benefit from them.

III.

The Liberal Theory of Hierarchy. The liberal theory of hierarchy rules that traditional forms of aristocratic, gender, race, or religious hierarchy and privilege are *prima facie* unacceptable. The goal of social equality is that, in some sense, all should be treated on a level. Sight and physical

metaphors are common. Philip Pettit suggests that everyone should be able to ‘walk tall’ and ‘look each other in the eye’ (2012, p. 3). Bertolt Brecht wrote that the worker ‘Wants no servants underfoot. And no boss overhead.’ (1934, p. 31-2). Similar belief in the equal status of all can be found in some forms of Stoic thought, and early Christianity, although, of course, later forms of the Church became obsessed with rank and status, with egalitarian Christianity surviving through Protestant and non-conformist sects, such as the Quakers (Walzer 1983).

But what, precisely, is wrong with dividing society hierarchically, whether by group or individual? The charge, I take it, is that it is simply false that some people are intrinsically better than others, at least independently of their characters and behaviour. Acting as if some are superior and some inferior creates unjustified privilege and disadvantage, both in itself (the mere belief is problematic in creating reverence and disrespect) and in its likely consequential effects.

One obvious response is to assert that, as a matter of fact, some people simply are better than others in some respects. Carina Fourie distinguishes hierarchies of status from hierarchies of esteem, which are based on generally admired characteristics, such as intelligence, moral character or beauty (2015). These, of course, do not all feel the same, for the type of admiration we have for each of intelligence, moral character and beauty seem very different. But nevertheless, such hierarchies are a pervasive part of human existence, and the potential cost of trying to eliminate them, even if it were desirable, would be enormous. Yet would we really want to eliminate them even if we could? H.P. Lotter points out the centrality to our lives of the capacity ‘to amuse and amaze others through expressing rare individual and team talents and skills’. (2011, p. 36) which seems to presuppose a type of hierarchy of esteem. The real question is what consequences should follow from the recognition of merit. Fourie suggests that the appropriate response is admiration and praise, but it should not have any further consequences (see also Scanlon 2018, 34-5). David Miller puts it this way:

John may be a better doctor than Peter, in which case it is right for me to prefer seeing him when I am sick, but in every other respect I regard them as equals and treat them accordingly. I don’t show John any deference that I withhold from Peter except in the particular area in which he has superior expertise (1997, 233-4).

Scanlon, I think, would agree with Miller that John’s better doctoring skills do not entitle him to a greater degree of deference than I give to Peter, other than in medical matters. But should he get paid more for being a better doctor? Scanlon proposes that there are circumstances in

which this is reasonable. It could be, for example, that there are familiar incentive-based reasons for having a market that rewards some higher skilled people with higher pay. From an egalitarian point of view such inequalities are, *prima facie*, problematic. But Scanlon argues that this objection to inequality can be answered provided that three conditions are met. First, it must be a situation where socially we need institutions with differential roles and rewards, for, perhaps, reasons of efficiency or allocation. But every person should have fair and equal opportunity of acquiring those positions, and hence two further conditions must be met: procedural fairness and substantive opportunity. In other words, in the cases where hierarchy is needed for functional reasons, it is only acceptable under conditions of genuine equality of opportunity, which includes not only non-discrimination, but also creating favourable conditions under which people can make genuine choices (Scanlon 2018).

Obviously, there are questions that can be asked at the level of detail, and different versions of similar ideas, but the general picture is clear. Hierarchies of esteem can be justified on the basis of valued characteristics, but the suitable response is admiration rather than material reward. However, hierarchies of status and reward are sometimes justified, if they meet two conditions: first there is a real social need for them in the sense that they are intrinsic to a justified institution; and second there is a genuinely fair and open competition for higher status roles.

IV.

Challenges to the Liberal Theory: Overspill. Miller suggested that the fact I may defer to John on medical issues in no reason for giving him any sort of privilege or preference in others. Yet if we know that John is an excellent doctor, might we not find ourselves giving him an exceptional level of consideration in other matters? Perhaps listening more carefully than we might to others when he expresses political views, or encouraging him to sit in the better seats at a community event? We might think this is a matter of common courtesy, but of course the whole point of such treatment is that it is uncommon courtesy, or at least in some way special. This raises the possibility that there is a tendency for hierarchy to spill outside the sphere in which it is justified, and eventually become a form of unjustified elitism. We can ask whether it really is likely to be the case that someone can be picked out as of higher status in one respect, but treated as an exact equal in others.

There are many examples in which a social theorist has suggested that there are good functional reasons for creating an elite within a group. W.E.D. Du Bois, for example, argued that Black emancipation in United

States should be fronted by ‘the talented tenth’, of educated and gifted leaders (2008 [1903]). In his later work he became concerned that the elite, once in place, would acquire wealth for themselves, rather than provide leadership for the sake of others, and hence the functional justification disappears or is at least diluted. (2014 [1940]). Similar considerations affected revolutionary movements. Within Marxism it is particularly apparent in relation to Lenin’s idea of the ‘vanguard’ (1961 [1902]), the small group of intellectuals and activists who would lead the revolution but then hand power to all. Anarchists, such as Bakunin, very sagely predicted that power once, acquired, would be abused and never relinquished (1950, p. 31). Even if a hierarchy is established for justified reasons, perfectly in accordance with Scanlon’s principles, the test is whether it can remain within those bounds.

In a sense this is familiar territory in political philosophy. Walzer argues that there are several different ‘spheres’ of justice each with their own distributive principle. He is very concerned that success in one area should not provide access to rewards in others. Those, for example, of high potential as scholars, should be given access to education, but not, just for that reason, wealth. Walzer, therefore, is concerned about overspill very generally from sector to sector (1983) His arguments that it should not happen seem compelling, yet putting mechanisms in place to avoid it are not so easy. Even more so, if, as many have suggested, human psychology is against it.

In practical terms, then, it may seem we have a dilemma if it is impossible to prevent overspill. Liberal egalitarians can support some hierarchies for functional purposes, yet accept that the cost of this will be overspill and the creation of privileged elites, or they can attempt to prevent all hierarchies, and lose whatever functional benefits that would have been gained. But perhaps this puts things too starkly, and a middle ground is possible. I will return to this issue in the concluding section of this paper.

v.

Challenges to the Liberal Theory: Shallowness. Although it may face difficulties of implementation, the liberal theory of hierarchy provides a pleasing philosophical solution; there is a point to some hierarchies of status and reward, and some hierarchies of esteem are also acceptable, but everything needs its justification, and these justifications set limits. As long as the problem of overspill can be dealt with, all is well. Yet some will harbour a suspicion that the victory has been won too easily; that there is something in the human psyche that has not been addressed, and

that there is some deeper need or justification for hierarchy that the liberal view doesn't address.

One representative of this alternative view is Simone Weil. Weil frames her discussion by suggesting that human beings have two types of needs, which we can, least tendentially, call 'material' and 'non-material', although her preferred phrase is 'needs of the soul' (Bookchin considers the privileging of the material over the spiritual as itself a manifestation of hierarchy (2005 [1982]) p. 68). Weil's list of material needs is short and not controversial, including food, lodging, heating (she was writing in the English winter), and so on (1952, p. 6). But her list of non-material needs is very extensive. It starts with 'order', saying, insightfully, 'The first of the soul's needs ... is order; that is to say, a texture of social relationships such that no one is compelled to violate imperative obligations in order to carry out other ones' (1952, p. 9).

She includes fourteen distinct categories of needs of the soul, of which equality is fifth and hierarchism sixth. Her view on equality is that although role differentiation in society is inevitable, we do better if we treat 'different human conditions as being, not more nor less than one another, but simply as other. Let us look on the professions of miner and minister simply as two different vocations, like those of poet and mathematician' (17). This much seems consistent with the Miller/Fourie/Scanlon position.

Yet immediately, even on the same page, she moves on to discuss hierarchism. The section is very short, and I quote it in full:

Hierarchism is a vital need of the human soul. It is composed of a certain veneration, a certain devotion towards superiors, considered not as individuals, nor in relation to the powers they exercise, but as symbols. What they symbolize is that realm situated high above all men and whose expression in this world is made up of the obligations owed by each man to his fellow-men. A veritable hierarchy presupposes a consciousness on the part of the superiors of this symbolic function and a realization that it forms the only legitimate object of devotion among their subordinates. The effect of true hierarchism is to bring each one to fit himself morally into the place he occupies (17-8).

There is a clear transcendent aspect to this argument, emphasising devotion, symbolic function, and the idea of a place in a whole. The idea, of course, of 'knowing your place' is at the centre of thoughts about hierarchy: it is a phrase recited by conservatives, but treated as contemptible by radicals. But without exactly presenting an argument this passage conveys the message that some form of hierarchy is essential to a stable and sound social order. Without it, just as if we fail to meet our other needs, we lack 'roots' and will become alienated from society. In an earlier section Weil

has made the importance of symbols very clear, saying ‘wherever a man is placed for life at the head of the social organism, he ought to be a symbol and not a ruler, as is the case with the king of England’ (p 13).

Weil’s position is in stark contrast to the liberal theory. What matters for Weil is the symbolic role of hierarchy, rather than the need for a hierarchical distribution of roles to fulfil a range of tightly defined functions. We could say that on Weil’s view hierarchy does serve a function, but then all social hierarchies serve the same function, which is providing a social order in which people can find their place.

It is an interesting empirical question whether hierarchies do serve this function, and whether we are quite generally prepared to defend them on this basis. Take a political leader, whether king, president, or prime minister. Ostensibly we might say, at least in the case of elected officials, that they meet Scanlon’s criteria, or at least could do in principle. Political leadership is needed for obvious functional reasons, and we need people with particular skills to play those roles. A democratic system, if it is functioning well, should guarantee a fair procedure, and background equal educational opportunities puts everyone in the right conditions from which they can make their choices whether or not to stand. Of course, no actual political system has ever functioned like this. And if we are talking about a monarchy the background conditions of equality do not apply. Nevertheless, we might still say that particular people are appointed leaders because their personal qualities equip them for a role that is to the benefit of all. Hence there is a quasi-liberal argument for political hierarchy.

Yet there is also a Weilian argument too. We need to have a leader to maintain social order, and, within limits, it does not matter too much who they are, especially if their leadership is primarily symbolic. Indeed, it seems that we do best with a division of labour: a symbolic leader who has no power, and a leader appointed by fair procedure to act in the public interest. And this, of course, is what a system of constitutional monarchy is. One test of whether the hierarchy topped by the leader is liberal or Weilian is what happens when the leader becomes ill and unable to perform the normal functions. For a Weilian leader this is inconvenience, as it means, for example, someone else will have to inspect the guards, or host a charity event, but of little further consequence. But for the liberal leader it generates a crisis, as the entire justification of the hierarchy depends on the institution fulfilling its purposes (for historical discussion of this question (see Post and Robins 1993). However, Weil’s view that hierarchy is somehow built into human need, and not reducible to functional justification as the liberal suggests, receives powerful support from what

has become known as Social Dominance Theory (SDT), whether or not she herself would have wished to seek support from social theory.

VI.

Social Dominance Theory. SDT, developed by Sidanius and Pratto (1999) motivates a distinction between two types, or manifestations, of social hierarchy; individual, and group. So far, I have primarily focused on individual hierarchies, considering examples of one person being assigned a position of power or prestige in relation to others (the ‘holy man’, ‘the old man’). In some cases, they will be assigned to a higher status in virtue of membership of a group, such as being part of an aristocracy. Yet there do seem to be two different types of hierarchy, for in addition to these individual relations of one person above another, there are also hierarchies of groups. They can enable individual hierarchies in that they will typically place a member of a dominant group above a member of a subordinate group (although individual reversals do happen too). However, group hierarchies generally cannot be explained as consequences of individual hierarchies, even if they are sometimes rationalised in those ways. Being a member of the aristocracy places a person above another, independently of any of their characteristics, even if what Sedanius and Pratto call ‘legitimizing myths’, may pretend otherwise (1999, p. 45, see also Walzer 1983, p. 26-8).

According to SDT, group social hierarchies exist in all societies with sufficient economic productivity to create a surplus that can be used to maintain a group without working (this is a deliberate echo of Marx’s theory of class). In very low development societies group dominance, as distinct from, individual authority figures, is unlikely. SDT suggests that three factors underpin group social dominance: age, gender, and what is termed an ‘arbitrary set feature’. Age is mentioned in both Barclay’s and Smith’s account of the emergence of hierarchy; gender is implicit in Barclay’s (‘the big man’, the ‘holy man’ etc) but not mentioned by Smith. One can only imagine that gender dominance was so deep and pervasive he took it entirely for granted, at least in this passage of writing. The ‘arbitrary set feature’ is the most distinctive element. SDT claims that each society will find a feature, be it skin colour, membership of a particular religion, ancestry, party membership, and so on, that will put one group above others, allowing them to reap social value at the expense of other groups. They claim that no society, above a certain level of economic development, has ever avoided social group hierarchy, and that all attempts to refashion society without it have failed (Sidanius and Pratto 1999, 35). Anthropological counter-examples of primitive societies of much more egalitarian stripe are not effective as they are below the level

of economic development specified by the thesis. It is sometimes said that some contemporary societies, such as those of Scandinavia, have achieved a level of social egalitarianism, but even they have a class structure that distributes social value.

From a liberal egalitarian point of view, group hierarchies are deeply problematic. As we saw, some liberal egalitarians have attempted to defend individual hierarchies of status or reward within very tight bounds, but their entire *raison d'être* is that they are not based on arbitrary grounds. In a truly socially egalitarian society there should be no group hierarchies. But if SDT is correct then they will always exist in moderately prosperous societies and the attempt to remove them will fail, often in disastrous fashion. This creates a severe headache for the social egalitarian.

Nevertheless, Sidanius and Pratto do recognise that different members of society can have what they call different Social Dominance Orientations (SDOs). Some people wish to enhance, or at least protect, the hierarchy, while others seek to attenuate it. It seems to be a contingent matter how many people will fall into the different groups, and hence there is a prospect of attenuating the hierarchy, at least under some conditions.² And it may also be the case that SDO is, to a degree malleable. Furthermore, the stark picture SDT presents seems over-simplified, as it assumes that every society has a single division line. But there are often many such lines, and competing hierarchies, and coalitions will form for different reasons (Wolff 2017). Indeed, in the case of their own example of Israel, sometime the authors use the example of Ashkenazi Jews being dominant in relation to Sephardi Jews, but sometimes use the example of Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs. Furthermore, whether the historical record tells the tale that SDT supposes has been contested (Turner and Reynolds 2003). Nevertheless, even if not universal, the story of group hierarchy over time and space means that it cannot be brushed aside.

Even so, we need to ask what causes the emergence of group hierarchy. Economic surplus seems to be a necessary condition, but it is hard to see why it should be sufficient. And unless we know more, we will not know whether it is possible to eliminate group hierarchy. For example, if, as Weil suggests, hierarchy meets a 'need of the soul', once we understand that need we may be able to divert it to forms of expression that are more consistent with social equality. Sidanius and Pratto speculate that both gender and group dominance are the evolutionary consequence of human reproductive behaviour and the different levels of investment men and women need to make in order to reproduce. The model they produce is

² See also Boehm's 'ambivalence model' in which humans will generate egalitarian and hierarchical societies under different conditions (Boehm 1999).

very thin, however, and although they may well be correct they do not provide a strong account. Freud suggests hierarchical group formation is a consequence of the human drive for aggression ((1982 [1929/1930]). Again, he might be right, and the apparently different accounts of Weil (a need of the soul) SDT (human evolution) and Freud (the drive to aggression) could all be different ways of identifying the same mechanism. Yet I think it would be unsafe to suggest that we know any to be correct. From the point of view of social equality, SDT leaves us in a perilous position. There is good reason to believe that group hierarchy is a pervasive feature of moderately prosperous human societies; that attempting to remove it has caused a great deal of damage; and although there is plenty of speculation, there is little solid evidence of what causes it. How, then, should a social egalitarian respond?

VII.

Ideal and Real World Theory Revisited. Prior to the twentieth century, it was common for works in political philosophy to draw on human nature: Hobbes wrote a whole book on the subject (*De Homine*), and the first chapters of *Leviathan* lay out his principles of human motivation (1999 [1651].) . Rousseau, famously, said that he would take human beings as they are (1997 [1762]) 41. Bentham (1970 [1789]) and Godwin (2013 [1793]) also set out premises about human motivation. A mixture of humility and abstraction has led to this approach falling out of fashion. It is not for the political philosopher to set out a theory of human nature on a priori grounds. But rather than join forces with anthropology or social psychology, philosophy has sometimes moved to a plane where accounts of human nature and motivation are thought unimportant, or irrelevant. G.A. Cohen has provided the most explicit version of this; normative truth does not depend on any facts at all. However, even Cohen argues that ‘principles of regulation’ do need to take into account human frailties and limitations (2003). And when we operate at the level of making policy recommendations, we must follow the precepts of real world political philosophy that I mentioned earlier in this paper: start from where we are; consider people psychologically as they are; and consider also how they will react to new laws and regulations, especially if they find that those new constraints are, in some sense, against the grain.

The need for such realism clearly comes out, for example, in debates about the free market, where it has been generally accepted that human beings cannot acquire the level of knowledge needed to run a purely planned economy (Cohen 2009). In the very early Rawls, the departure from equality sanctioned by the Difference Principle was described as a ‘[concession] to human nature’ (1958, p. 173). The clear suggestion is that

that ideals have to be modified to take account of how human beings will act, although this wording was later dropped by Rawls.³

If ideal theory egalitarians believe that group hierarchies are unjustifiable and that the task for political theorists and activists is to attempt to abolish them, then the historical record in relation to attempts to abolish hierarchy should set off alarm bells. Real world political philosophy is in a different position. It starts from the claim, not that some state of affairs would be good (according to the best theory) but rather that some aspects of the world as presently experienced are problematic, perhaps to a very high degree, in that they grossly restrict the possibility for real people here and now to lead flourishing human lives. On this view it is much more important to consider those towards the bottom of the hierarchies, whether individual or group, rather than those at the top, and to understand whether their place in the hierarchy starves them of social values of other forms, such as security, resources, opportunities, or political power.

The way forward is the recognition that, even if group hierarchy is inevitable, it appears to come in more or less pernicious forms. Weil is surely right that restricting the manifestations of hierarchy to symbolic forms is much better than allowing it spread more broadly. For example, allowing the aristocracy to occupy the front pews in Church is much better than providing higher education exclusively to their children. A monarchy, openly enjoying a lavish lifestyle, but with political power held by a democratically elected government, would be preferable to rule by a shadowy cadre of unelected party faithful.

Accordingly, it is possible to argue that group hierarchy is highly problematic from the point of view of social inequality, without also proposing that an all-out attack on hierarchy is justified. First, we don't know if it is even possible to abolish hierarchy, and second, we do not know what damage it would do. The methodology adopted here suggests that we should pay attention to the most damaging exemplifications of hierarchy, and explore what can be done to eliminate or mitigate them, monitoring carefully as we proceed to ensure that the world doesn't react back in a way that causes even more harm. Most notably we should look for three features: first where the hierarchy is especially damaging, crushing the prospects of those at the bottom; second where the means needed to make change are relatively inexpensive or already to hand; and third where there would be beneficial consequential effects, for example by improving the confidence and self-belief of those previously affected to pursue newly created opportunities (related to what I have elsewhere

³ I owe this observation to Alan Carter.

called fertile functionings, see Wolff and de-Shalit 2007). This might mean that we should start in unintuitive places. For example, if it could be shown that snobbery and servility tend to enable exploitation and violence, then an assault on snobbery and servility would indirectly bear important dividends. But this needs to be established, rather than merely claimed.

It is also important to consider how, for a relational or social egalitarianism change is to take place. In seeking to understand the nature of social equality, different theorists have identified different mechanisms by which inequality can be manifested, and, by implication, sites of possible reform. Possibilities are the importance of the manner in which institutions directly and indirectly treat people (Schemmel 2011), the nature of democracy (Koldony 2014), and linking with real social movements (Young 1990) and (Anderson 1998). All of these are important and complimentary. Yet we also know how it is possible to abuse privilege in our own individual lives, in allowing or encouraging hierarchy to overspill from an area where it is arguably justified on liberal egalitarian principles to those where it is not. From the point of view of social equality, we all have a duty to be, and to encourage others to be, hierarchy attenuators rather than enhancers, especially, but not only, in the most serious cases. In sum, while we can agree with Scanlon and others that two different types of individual hierarchy can be justified (hierarchies of esteem and of reward or status), it is less clear what the social egalitarian should say to Weil, who argues that some form of hierarchy is a ‘need of the soul’ or to SDT theorists who argue that group hierarchy is, in effect, inevitable. In practical terms, however, Weil does not defend all forms of existing hierarchies, preferring symbolic forms to those that, oppressively, accumulate power and privilege. For the real world social egalitarian, this gives a clear target for action.

CONCLUSION

I remember reading a story about the American film critic Alexander Walker who, as a life-long defender of political republicanism mournfully remarked to a friend that he had just realised there were only a handful of countries where you could really be free, and, to his dismay, they are all monarchies: The Netherlands, The UK, Sweden, Denmark and Norway. The argument is contestable in several ways, of course, but it could be that there is something to Weil’s argument that, contrary to Bertrand Russell’s famous jibe,⁴ purely ceremonial hierarchies have an important function. It may be important to detach privilege and prestige from real power.

⁴ ‘The law of causality, I believe, like much that passes muster among philosophers, is a relic of a bygone age, surviving, like the monarchy, only because it is erroneously supposed to do no harm.’ (Russell, 1912-3, p. 1)

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