

What about inheritance?

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What about inheritance? Just the smallest amount of reflection on the issue should convince everyone that where and when and to whom, and in what circumstances, a person is born matters a great deal. One child is born of parents who are privileged by wealth or race or position or social circumstances (and often all of those, as they tend to clump together), and that privilege is inherited by the child through no choice or action or anything else done by the child. Another child is born in dire poverty or as a member of a non-privileged race or clan or social group, or as a refugee in a displaced persons camp in a country torn by war. So one child inherits great benefit(s), and another inherits nothing, or little, or even great disadvantage(s). (I thought of this again recently when reading a newspaper account about the terrible situation today of the Syrian refugees from Bashir Assad's war against his own people. Some of the refugees could be said to have chosen or caused their fate by choosing to oppose Assad. But that is certainly not true of the small children – they didn't choose or do anything, one way or another.)

So, the question is whether inheritance is ethically justified. Some people – Bill Gates for one – have argued against inheritance of wealth. Presumably, if you favor that view, you want the state to take all– or at least a major part of – estates when someone dies, so that no estate or inheritance significantly larger than any other would go to any child. People who argue against this view say that, without the ability to pass on their achieved wealth to their heirs, people would have no or little incentive to work and/or plan to achieve wealth, so there would be no or little incentive for economic advance and development. People of a more egalitarian mindset, especially radical egalitarians, say that no one – especially babies – should receive any more by birth than anyone else; that anything other than that is offensive to human existence and human rights.

Those of you who are familiar with Plato's Republic will remember that Plato advocated that all babies should be taken and reared by the state in state run institutions and schools. Each child was to be regarded as a citizen/ward of the state with all people of the appropriate age regarded as his/her parents, and with no connection – financial or otherwise – between the actual parents and their children. This is one of the reasons that Austrian-English philosopher Karl Popper, in his book "The Open Society and Its Enemies," argued so vehemently and relentlessly against Plato, devoting the whole of Book One of the two-book opus to attacking Plato. Popper's central attack was that Plato was an enemy of the open society, in other words in Popper's view Plato was one of the strongest philosophical proponents of political totalitarianism. It's noteworthy that Popper wrote this during WWII as his response to German National Socialism – Nazism; Popper regarded this book as his contribution to the war effort against the Axis powers and their ideologies.

Also, as Gordon Anderson pointed out to me, Plato's student Aristotle had a strong rebuttal to Plato's view of wives and children being held in common; the basic point of his objection was that a state doesn't care for people individually. It gives everyone the same ration, and removes incentives for people to care for others, by depriving them of the property necessary to host guests or perform other social services apart from the state. But, if you go to the other extreme and say that family inheritance is inviolable then you face the problem raised by Morton Kaplan and others: If there were no inheritance tax, then within a few generations a few families would control the entire country at least economically. Equal opportunity has to be balanced by the natural economic incentives of family. Therefore Kaplan was for exempting, say the first \$20 million, but progressively taxing inheritance after that.

Kaplan's response, however, deals only with the economic or financial aspect of inheritance. That aspect may be the most important, but it does not deal with things such as inheritance of intelligence, or musical or athletic skills, or race, or clan, or beauty, or medical condition, or family name and connection(s), or lineage. So, my question: What about inheritance? Clearly it is at least prima facie grossly unfair — even evil. Should something be done (by the state, especially, or by someone else) to stop it, or at least ameliorate its effects? If so, what? Would any effort against it cause more harm/evil than what presently exists (i.e. would it make things worse)?

Part of me wants to say, if you don't like what exists, take it up with God. That's because, unless you're an atheist or you think God is not the ultimate causal being, God is clearly the ultimate cause of these very great differences (and evils). Is that a good or suitable answer? Is it just ducking the question? Or is it the only truthful answer that can be given?

Life is clearly unfair, especially to children (who are, e.g., born dirt poor, black, untouchable, born with horrible diseases, the child of a Korean woman and a black American GI, born in African misery or the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, or whatever). Is there any answer to that problem other than blunt and fatalistic acceptance?

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