

If every person possesses intrinsic worth, does society have a moral duty to reduce poverty and inequality?

“All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (Orwell 134).

A line ferociously raw and fresh, even after 81 years of its publication in 1945, encapsulates modern societies' stark contradiction: a paradox professing inviolable human dignity yet functioning on instrumental value and material output.

George Orwell's chilling and thought-provoking fable, *Animal Farm*, revolves around the premise of exploited farm animals who depose their human masters to establish their own utopia where every animal is endogenously “equal”. However, as a hierarchy ossifies and the disparities in cognitive and physical assets are weaponized, the farm gradually descends into a totalitarian regime ruled by pigs - reverting back to the very same system they had revolted against. *Animal Farm*'s fatal flaw was that it was structurally determined by the pretense of equality faced with a harrowing reality of a calcified, dysfunctional hierarchy. Considered as one of Orwell's most seminal works, *Animal Farm* left us with the deeply contested question: is equality even structurally possible?

In this essay, I argue that equality is impossible, yet it should stand as an ideal we should work towards using the instrument of equity. Society has a definitive moral duty to honor intrinsic worth, and in order to move beyond the entrenched hierarchies of George Orwell's ‘equal’ *Animal Farm*, society must be restructured in a way that moves away from the pretense of instrumental output and towards equity as the cornerstone for honoring intrinsic worth.

At the heart of ontology, the question of human existence, lies a fundamental axiom of our intrinsic worth.

As Immanuel Kant puts it, it is an imperative to treat humanity as an end in itself. Each human must be treated with dignity due to their presumed capacities and predispositions of rational autonomy and agency (qtd. in Hill 215); hence, each person possesses fundamental intrinsic worth.

Yet, what good is having intrinsic worth if society does not honor it?

Global indexes elucidate stark stratification in all parts of the world; as of 2024 the richest 1% own more wealth than 95% of humanity (Oxfam) and almost 700 million people (8.5% of the global population) live on less than \$2.15 per day (World Bank). Indeed, the *Animal Farm* - a stratified barn plagued by inequalities and poverty - parallels the contemporary world. No animal can be ‘more equal’ than another, and no human can possess more intrinsic worth than another: a harrowing paradox. The philosophical baseline of ontological equality found its legal codification in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights :

‘Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control(UN General Assembly, art.25).’

The solidification of a basic level of equality as a human right serves as a symbolic declaration and acknowledgement not only of our philosophical mandate for human dignity but also our value on each person's intrinsic worth(Hudson). Kant's belief of inherent value in each human serves as the foundation of basic human rights suggesting that intrinsic worth is a fixed, identical quality possessed by all human

beings. Yet still, despite this “commandment” of universal dignity enshrined into Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, social stratification remains deeply entrenched in the fabrics of modern (and historic) society - India’s caste system, European feudalism, America’s racial segregation and all of these systemic forms of inequality still reverberating today. Just like the barn, this datum is a hollow abstraction faced by systemic neglect; we have failed our moral duty to reduce poverty and inequality.

This leads into my central thesis: to operationalize this empty commandment, I will stand steadfastly against Animal Farm’s false equality and society’s emphasis on instrumental utility. Instead, through this essay I will illustrate how a framework of equity ensures that each human being’s intrinsic worth is not only recognized, but honored. Utilizing John Rawls’s Veil of Ignorance, it is possible to design a society where equity is the cornerstone to policy-making. To ensure justice and fairness, human dignity will be established through a two-legged mechanism, under Nancy Fraser’s bipartite principles of Redistribution and Recognition. Indeed, it is a moral duty to address poverty and inequality; these philosophers provide the moral justification and means to do so.

If one had the power to rewrite the rules of society, but as a knowledgeable entity deprived of idiosyncratic information, what would those rules look like? John Rawls posits this scenario would enable the most just and equitable society explained by his thought experiment of the “Veil of Ignorance”. Rawls states the Veil of Ignorance serves to “nullify the effects of specific contingencies which put men at odds and tempt them to exploit social and natural circumstances to their own advantage(118)”. If one is oblivious to their gender and race; class position or social status; or natural assets and abilities, Rawls suggests they would design a just, highly egalitarian and risk averse society through a purely objective lens, ensuring fairness regardless of being born into privilege or disadvantage. In his words in *A Theory of Justice*, “it seems reasonable and generally acceptable that no one should be advantaged or disadvantaged by natural fortune or social circumstances in the choice of principles(16).” Indeed, Rawls’s Veil of Ignorance serves as the foundation for equity; it forces those in the position to consider the interests and needs of all members in society - naturally leading to equitable policies and institutions.

In spite of this, Rawls’s Veil of Ignorance faces potent counterarguments that must be addressed for this societal framework to remain achievable. To Rawls, those under the Veil of Ignorance are guided by instrumental rationality(Rawls 124): “representatives will favour principles that will best advance their notion of the good – whatever it may come to be – given the information and resources available behind the Veil of Ignorance(qtd. in Wild 51)”. Critics like Harsanyi raise objections to Rawls’s instrument rationality, arguing that it oversimplifies human nature to be purely risk averse and rational while ignoring perspectives of utility where people may take a gamble at the low probability chance of privilege despite the high probability of disadvantage(qtd. in Wild 48). However, in the context of the argument of our moral duty to reducing poverty and inequality, this objection, while valid, misses the point of the Veil of Ignorance as a theoretical heuristic for fairness. When put in the original position, one will be serving as the architect for society as a whole, and making a gamble to benefit the one while disadvantaging the many is a neglect of Kantian ideals to treat every human as an end in themselves and a blatant contradiction from utilitarianism. The Veil of Ignorance serves to demonstrate our moral duty to equity through a logical, normative decision made in impartiality. There is no one with “more” intrinsic worth than another; society can not be designed like the dysfunctional Animal Farm. Thus, society should be designed to honor every person’s intrinsic worth regardless of individual circumstance.

Rawls sets the groundwork of what society should look like when fulfilling humanities’ moral duty to reduce poverty and inequality through the instrument of equity. However, fulfilling our moral duty of reducing inequalities and poverty is beyond just economic and institutional equity, but lies in ensuring fair redistribution and recognition for members in society. Today’s societies often measure human value

through exogenous metrics instead of intrinsic worth, and a stark dichotomy emerges between countries' and states' focus on economic growth and the search of their people for meaningful human lives. The dominant theoretical approaches in developing economics equate a countries' success to an increase in Gross National Product (GNP) per capita. Hence, if a country's economy is growing then it is assumed that it has the correct policies(Nussbaum 212).

However, Nussbaum argues that this measure does not account for distribution of wealth and any familial, social or political circumstances - inequalities and poverty can thrive in a seemingly "successful" nation when assessed through the wrong criteria. Thus, as part of our moral duty to reduce poverty and inequalities it is a moral duty to design society with redistribution and recognition as the cornerstones for honoring intrinsic worth. As the late Mahbub Ul Haq wrote in 1990: "The real wealth of a nation is its people. And the purpose of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy, and creative lives. This simple but powerful truth is too often forgotten in the pursuit of material and financial wealth(UNDP)." Humanity's value is not mere instrumental output, but a moral acknowledgment of the sanctity of life and each human being's inviolable dignity: our ingrained intrinsic worth.

Indeed, honoring intrinsic worth should remain at the cornerstone of policy-making, and this societal framework of equity remains achievable under Nancy Fraser's bipartite principles of redistribution and recognition. Perhaps the story of women rights can best encapsulate the imperative of these principles. Discrimination based on gender has been a pervasive issue intertwined into the strands of history. For centuries, women have been denied the right to education, employment and political participation solely based on gender(Oswald). This systemic exclusion is predicated on the fallacy that intrinsic worth is a tiered system - a parallel to the contradictory commandments of the dysfunctional Animal Farm. In many countries, women still face legal barriers to equality, such as laws that prevent them from inheriting property or require them to have a male guardian. Women are also disproportionately affected by poverty, with many working in low-wage jobs without access to basic benefits such as healthcare and paid leave(Oswald).

Ultimately, this historical gender disparity is rooted in a twofold failure: maldistribution and a lack of recognition. To rectify this fundamental issue and honor intrinsic worth, this approach moves beyond just a hollow apology under a pretense of "equality", and towards societal restructuring; it demands redistribution to remedy economic injustice and marginalization by "redistributing income, reorganising the division of labour, subjecting investment to democratic decision making, and transforming basic economic structures to ensure equity(Fraser)". Furthermore, ensuring recognition addresses the problem of inequality as a two dimensional issue; even with equity, a society that redistributes income perfectly can still fail its moral duty if it views individuals through a lens of instrument utility. And even in our equitable societies under the Veil of Ignorance, institutionalized injustices which deem people inferior, excluded or invisible can persist. A woman can earn the same wage as a man yet still face androcentric biases; minority groups can have access to specialized institutions yet still face cultural exclusion. Recognition by upwardly revaluing disrespected identities and the cultural products of maligned groups remains paramount in the transformation of societal patterns which value intrinsic worth regardless of societal standing and circumstances determined by birth(Fraser).

Acknowledging that each person possesses intrinsic worth is simply not enough. Society must move towards honoring it. We must escape from the morass of the Animal Farm and restructure society in a way that ensures equity; in a way that ensures just distribution; and in a way where recognition stands as a fundamental right. The philosophical means to escape our Animal Farm morass is perspicuous to the eye, but what is truly important must come from our hands. We cannot let the "pigs" serve as the architects to our society. We, the young Dalit girl in the slums of Mumbai to the wealthy American billionaire in the

heart of Wall Street, have a philosophical mandate to change the world; we all possess an endogenously equal intrinsic worth; and we all stand equally in our ontological rights. I leave you with this essay with the why and how we should change society. The only thing that is left is to change it.

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