# Deprivation of Possibility: Implications for Socioeconomic Inequality

*Policies proposed to narrow North America's growing economic class divide are often accused of violating rights to personal autonomy. Redistributive practices are thought to use innocent individuals as a means to benefit others. This serves as an easy argument against socioeconomic equality policies. To avoid this personal autonomy counterargument, I suggest that society has a moral requirement to increase socioeconomic equality consistent with the belief that it is harmful to be deprived of possibilities for one's life. By deriving three core principles from Nagel's views on death and possibilities, and applying those principles to the discussion of socioeconomic inequality, I demonstrate that our society is failing to uphold its moral obligation to those it disadvantages.*

## 1. Introduction

Wealth redistribution policies are commonly proposed amid North America's growing economic class divide. These policies suggest narrowing the economic divide by taxing wealth from the rich and redistributing it to those in need. However, opponents of these policies argue that violating innocent people's rights to personal freedom and retaining the fruits of their labour is immoral. Those who would be taxed for wealth redistribution have done nothing wrong to earn that penalty and cannot therefore be disadvantaged solely for the benefit of others. This view can be expressed as the right to *personal autonomy*. If we aim to respect personal autonomy, we cannot take resources from the innocent to give to the less fortunate no

matter how great the need. However, this leaves us with the problem of the growing economic class divide. The right to personal autonomy seems to hinder efforts to mitigate inequality, thus the class divide grows. This raises the question: what is society's responsibility regarding socioeconomic inequality? How might we address inequality if wealth redistribution is not morally acceptable?

I argue that our society is morally required to narrow the growing class divide. Allowing it to grow reveals an ethical inconsistency that amounts to a moral wrong. So, our society must take certain steps to mitigate this inequality to avoid moral wrongdoing. However, wealth redistribution is not part of this moral requirement. Following Thomas Nagel, I establish that death (and similar interference in our lives) is harmful insofar as it deprives us of future possibilities. I then argue that the socioeconomic disadvantage of certain groups in North American society constitutes a similar deprivation of possibilities – or *opportunities*.[1] Thus, ethical consistency requires the following: if interferences that deprive us of possibilities are harmful, then a society commits harm by allowing certain members to be deprived of possibilities through socioeconomic disadvantage that can be avoided. In other words, assuming it is immoral to cause unnecessary harm, society acts immorally by allowing the economic gap to grow unnecessarily.

In §2, I briefly explore socioeconomic policies that could help narrow the class divide. This paper is not focused on the particulars of socioeconomic policy, but such a wealth of options suggests greater equality is at least possible. If possible, ethical consistency demands we pursue it. In §3, I outline Nagel's view

[1] We can use the words "possibilities" and "opportunities" interchangeably. Nagel spoke of "possibilities" but "opportunities" is the more apt term in socioeconomic discussion.

of death and the deprivation of possibility, deriving three core principles. In §4, I reexamine the socioeconomic inequality in North America using these principles to determine the existence and extent of society's moral requirement to narrow the growing class divide.

## 2. Preliminaries

Before progressing, I should ask the obvious question: *can* we implement more aggressive socioeconomic equality policies? A limited inquiry suggests several ways we can do this. There are many economic options: divert (some) military development funds to economic development; expand tax credits for those who have children or earn below a certain income; create a federal jobs guarantee that ensures marginalized groups have alternative access to jobs that avoid gatekeeping and implicit biases in hiring systems.

There are also social options: implement programs that discover individuals in low-income areas who can be matched to jobs; increase access to higher education (German universities have nearly zero tuition fees); we also might increase childcare support, meaning those who already have employment but juggle their job with the need to support a child can benefit in non-economic ways (PIIE n.d.). Given these many options (among others), it is plausible to achieve greater equality than we currently have. Such plausibility is all that we must suppose for this discussion.

I must also note that this argument for greater socioeconomic equality does not stem from a sense of compassion or natural rights. These are the usual catalysts for social reform, but my argument is an observation rather than a prescription. I do not suggest we pursue equality from humanitarian sentiments. Rather, my conclusion results solely

from the observation that we think a certain way about the deprivation of possibilities, and if we carry that thinking into socioeconomic discussions, the demand for greater equality follows.

A final note on precisely what "greater equality" means. For our purposes, let us tentatively define socioeconomic inequality as *a set of social and financial disadvantages that some people face that others do not.* Without assuming the existence of a natural right to perfect equality between persons, society does not need to eliminate inequality to meet its moral obligation. This means society may not need to enact drastic wealth redistribution, giving further reason to think the policy options discussed above could be sufficient. When I speak of "greater equality," I mean precisely that – a more equal distribution of advantages and disadvantages than we currently have to however small or large a degree possible. We will find later on that this rather imprecise definition is not only justified but necessary.

## 3. Death and the Deprivation of Possibility

What is it about death that we find so unpleasant? For our purposes, let us assume no afterlife; the state of death is a complete annihilation of conscious experience. In this case, the state of death does not afflict us with any harmful experience because there is *no* experience; there is no longer anyone for whom death could be harmful (Epicurus n.d.). Instead, Thomas Nagel suggests death is harmful because it takes something from us. Once we die, certain doors are closed to us. We go through life always believing we have certain possibilities available. This feeling of *possibility* is a precious thing. It generates hope; hope that we may one day fulfill a certain potential we believe ourselves to have. This hope brings a certain anticipation, a

certain pleasure, that we may consider good. Thus, it is harmful to lose that feeling *after we have known it*. Note that the principal harm is not that we lose this feeling. If death was the end of our experience, we would be unaware of that loss. The principal harm is that we lose the *possibility* of having this feeling. Death is harmful because it is the deprivation of indefinitely extensive future possibilities (Nagel 1970, 80).

Consider an intelligent adult who suffers a brain injury, leaving her in the mental state of an infant. Nagel (1970, 77) notes that we generally view this as a severe misfortune. But why do we tend to feel that way? After all, the person with such an injury presumably does not experience any significant hardship. She would be as content as any sufficiently cared-for infant, being handled by a caretaker for the rest of her life, with virtually no suffering. And yet, there is something we find gravely pitiable about that situation. That person has lost the possibility to fulfill her potential. Whatever she could one day have been or done has been taken from her. This sentiment suggests we should not limit the categories of benefit and harm to active enjoyment and suffering. Being deprived of the possibility to realize some version of oneself should be considered genuine harm, not only because we want to reach that potential but because it is good to experience the anticipation of that realization – the possibility of it. Thus, Nagel (1970, 78) says, we benefit or are harmed just as much by our hopes and possibilities that are or are not fulfilled as we are by the active enjoyment or suffering that we experience.

But how does this deprivation of future possibilities harm us if it never comes into our awareness? If the injured person is perfectly content, it may be difficult to see the harm. So, assume that a person's life has a natural course that would have occurred

without interference. For the injured person, her traumatic injury deprived her of the future *she would otherwise have lived.* Likewise, for those who die, death deprives them of that future. These interferences deprive us of more anticipation of possibility, more time with our loved ones, more positive experiences, and, generally speaking, more opportunities to live what Michal Masny (2023, 240) calls a "complete life." A complete life is one involving satisfying qualities and quantities of fundamental welfare (Masny 2023, 240).

A potential objection to assuming a natural course for a person's life is that we cannot claim that nothing else would have interfered with that life had some particular interference not occurred. It seems plausible that some later interference could limit our possibilities even if the initial one had not occurred. This suggests that we should not consider particular interferences as genuine harms because we cannot predict what would have happened otherwise. For instance, I may consider it an inconvenient interference in my life if I cannot afford a car. But I may not know that without that interference, in an alternate situation where I possessed a car, I would have one day driven through a certain intersection at the same time as someone else, finding myself in a car accident. This could have been a far greater interference. So, this line of thinking suggests that I cannot rightly consider my lack of a car an inconvenience without knowing all that the future holds. However, this type of scepticism leads to indecision. The inability to judge or predict simply because we cannot be empirically certain of the future is not practical, nor is it the way we operate daily. We predict and act on those predictions despite knowing the future is uncertain. So, when projecting possibilities, we ought to assume the clearest expected path for a person's life while recognizing that we cannot always do this perfectly. As such, while we may know

that something else *could* interfere with one's life in the future, there is no reason to assume that something else *would* interfere. This means I can view my lack of a car as an interference because I should not assume that I would get in an accident if the situation were otherwise. So, we can consider interference genuinely harmful because it *conceivably* deprives us of more possibilities to live a complete life.

This leads us to the last important point we must understand about Nagel's view. There is a perceptual element that contributes to our belief that lost possibilities are a misfortune. Intellectually, most people know that they will die one day. This implies we know our time and possibilities are not infinite. It should follow that at least in some cases, death does not deprive us of any possible future because we experienced the natural course of our life, and that was all we were ever going to have. But in practice, we tend not to think this way. Most people rarely grapple with death as an intimate reality and instead see life as open-ended rather than as something with a "natural limit" (Nagel 1970, 80). In other words, despite knowing we will die, our experience intuitively *feels* infinite until the moment it ends because our experience is all we have ever known. Thus, death deprives us of that *feeling* of limitless further possibility – further anticipation – which is inherent to life.

The key thing to remember here is that one's perspective is crucial to that feeling of possibility. If one is deprived of a possibility that they do not think of as a genuine likelihood, it will not feel like a deprivation and consequently will not be harmful. The harm comes from being deprived of a possibility considered a genuine likelihood, or at least exists within the realm of conceivability. Consider a European who died before the first European forays to the New World. Such a person had

no awareness of the Americas. They did not feel that death deprived them of the possibility of one day exploring those regions because they had not yet conceived of it. Conversely, many Europeans in the generations immediately following the first New World explorations had that possibility in their awareness. Since they had conceived of it, they could feel that death deprived them of that possibility if they died before they could realize it. One's perspective is the determining factor for harm through deprivation of a possibility.

I summarize this section in the following principles: First, if death (or interference) is harmful, it is so by depriving us of further possibilities we would otherwise have had later in life. Second, there is some standard for a "complete life" that a deprivation of possibilities interferes with. And third, an individual's perspective is a significant determining factor in what they see as possible for their life. I now apply these principles to the socioeconomic divide in North America to show that our society is morally required to narrow that divide as much as is feasible without violating personal autonomy.

## 4. Socioeconomic Inequality as Deprivation of Possibility

At this point, we can add to our definition of socioeconomic inequality: it is *a set of social and financial disadvantages that some people face that others do not,* and *these disadvantages deprive the disadvantaged class of opportunities for a more complete life.*

Whether it be wealth and earnings disparities (Ontario.ca n.d.; Smith-Carrier et al. 2021, 80-82), implicit biases in hiring and justice systems (Carnahan & Moore 2023), or unequal access to healthy diets and healthcare (Løvhaug 2002, 12; Williams 2003, 140, 146), certain members of society experience distinct disadvantages in their lives that others do not. Women generally

receive lower wages than men for the same work; visible ethnic minorities often suffer discrimination in hiring and courts due to employers' and judges' implicit biases; and even the food and healthcare available to poorer or isolated communities are inferior to those available to others. The culprits behind socioeconomic inequality are not a monolith; no group or individual takes sole blame because inequalities are baked into the structure of our society. The responsibility for inequalities thus belongs to governments, institutions, businesses, and other groups right down to individuals. As long as there are feasible non-violating policies that have not yet been implemented to increase equality, anyone not open to those policies fails to uphold society's moral requirement. Now, we can apply the three principles from §3 to see how allowing unnecessary socioeconomic inequality is a deprivation of possibilities that we should consider immoral.

### 4.1. Inequality as Interference

If we accept that death, physical trauma, and other interferences are harmful because they deprive us of certain possibilities in life, it follows that society harms the disadvantaged by perpetuating socioeconomic inequalities that could be addressed. Wealth/health disparities, implicit biases, failing infrastructure, and so on act as interferences limiting the possibilities – or *opportunities* – of individuals. Thus, such inequalities produce the same type of harm as the interferences seen in §3. Whether it be disadvantageous laws established by governments, extortionate business strategies practiced by corporations, or individuals wilfully ignoring inequality, all these acts contribute to depriving certain people of possibilities for their lives. If our society can mitigate even a single one of those harms, as the options in §2 suggest it can, then we are

collectively responsible for failing to do so. Understood this way, it is an active harm that men and women receive different wages for equal work when this could be rectified; it is an active harm that some people can more easily lead healthier lives than others. Any non-violating action our society can take against these conditions must be taken, if possible, as a matter of moral consistency with the view that the deprivation of possibilities is harmful.

Recall that I do not suggest addressing these harms on humanitarian grounds. The altruism implied in such arguments leads people to demand radical equality policies that are difficult to defend. Such policies as wealth redistribution or DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) are easily rejected because they violate the right to personal autonomy by using individuals as merely a means to an end. Proponents of these altruistic arguments may claim, for example, that privileged members of society "already have enough" and therefore the less fortunate have some claim to the privileged people's resources. However, it violates personal autonomy to take resources or opportunities from the innocent and redistribute them to those in need no matter how great the need. To avoid this violation of personal autonomy, the ethical consistency argument that I propose takes radical altruism out of the picture. The support for socioeconomic equality then no longer hinges on prioritizing the prosperity of the disadvantaged over the autonomy of the advantaged. Rather, the argument pivots to say that social institutions that deprive certain people of opportunities are immoral not because people are owed certain rights but because allowing those institutions to exist unnecessarily is itself a harmful act. If this argument holds, it becomes a foundation for promoting social change (albeit less radical change) that is more

easily defensible than arguments based on altruism or ill-defined conceptions of natural human rights.

### 4.2. Completeness of Life

As we have seen, society not doing its utmost to mitigate inequality amounts to actively denying opportunities to certain people. But opportunities for what? Opportunities to live a "complete life" by having *a sufficiently satisfying quality and quantity of fundamental welfare*. Society influences many basic social issues by allowing inequality to persist: poverty, personal achievements, relationships, social contributions, social recognition, and pleasure (Masny 2023, 240-242). On one hand, it is not morally wrong for society not to help me achieve the goal of owning 17 Ferraris; that possibility goes well beyond fundamental welfare. On the other hand, it is morally wrong for society not to ensure equal wages for equal work or to allow practices that excessively divert funds from combating homelessness. Sufficient money and a place to live are part of a complete life as they allow one to pursue achievements, relationships, social recognition, social contributions, and pleasure. Society failing to do its utmost to provide opportunities for fundamental welfare needed for a complete life is therefore harmful. Notice the harm comes not from society failing to *provide* these things but from society failing *to do its utmost* to provide these things. Again, the moral requirement is not total equality. The requirement is to *strive* for as much equality as possible. Failure to do so is ethically inconsistent with our aversion to deprivations of possibility. So, the "complete life" view is a minimalist approach to socioeconomic rebalancing. The idea is not to impoverish the rich for the sake of uplifting the poor. That would violate personal autonomy. The idea is that society is morally required to increase aid to the disadvantaged

*to some extent,* but not to the most extreme extent. It follows from the deprivation of possibilities argument only that some form of economic rebalancing should occur to the extent that it brings those in need closer to a complete life while leaving individuals' autonomy intact. And to reiterate, "society" is the catch-all term for all the entities that compose our geopolitical region: all the private citizens, small businesses, large corporations, and governments. Accordingly, each of us may become ethically consistent by doing whatever small part we can to pursue this rebalancing of possibilities. Individuals may raise awareness about these inequalities, businesses may institute practices that combat implicit biases, and so on up to the highest levels of government where large-scale policy decisions are made.

We now have a pluralistic understanding of the various roles of individuals and groups that compose our society and how each of us may further our society's efforts toward equality of possibilities. However, the "complete life" concept does not tell us clearly how much rebalancing or aid needs to be given. We have certain basic social goods that guide our understanding of life completeness, but we do not know the quantitative threshold that defines a complete life. In other words, how much completeness is needed? How much wealth? How much personal achievement? How many relationships? This desire to quantify the complete life may tempt us to represent that completeness by some material standard of living. This is a mistake. To illustrate this concern, let us temporarily make a complete life analogous to a standard of living, comparing that with worldwide contentment levels. This exercise reveals that those with a higher standard of living are not necessarily more content than those with a lower standard. Indonesia, Thailand, Kuwait, and Cambodia boast higher average happiness levels than Canada and the United States (Stinson 2024; Helliwell et al.

2024) despite the latter pair having higher average standards of living. So, quantifiable standards of living do not directly inform one's contentment, which suggests there must be more to the notion of a complete life. That is why we must focus on the social concerns mentioned above.[2] Society's disadvantaged class has fewer opportunities to pursue basic social goods, meaning fewer opportunities to live a complete life. The social nature of these basic goods is why we cannot quantify them as we would economic standards of living. I explain this through the final principle from §3: the importance of one's perspective.

### 4.3. Perceptual Experience

Perhaps the most important factor informing the harms of North American socioeconomic inequality is that the disadvantaged can see what they are missing. They know there are people among them with vastly more opportunities than they have. Consider death again; if one died at the age of 20 but humans only had an average life expectancy of 25, this death would not seem so great a shame. We would not feel that much possibility had been taken away. Likewise, if one died around 80 but had a general life expectancy of 653, that would be a considerable shame. We would feel like a large amount of possibility was taken away. The way we view our situation is crucial to how we view the harm done to our possibilities. So, a severely materially disadvantaged class of people that does not consider itself disadvantaged would presumably not suffer the same feeling of harm as a less materially disadvantaged class that does consider itself disadvantaged. Thus, happiness levels are independent of standards of living. It is not strictly economic standards of living that determine a complete life, but social

[2] E.g., poverty, personal achievements, relationships, social contributions, social recognition, and pleasure. Found on p. 11.

factors which, crucially, are influenced by personal perspective. The quantities of achievement, recognition, or relationships a person needs are informed by how much they *think* they need. The problem is that our society's disadvantaged class is constantly confronted with people who have more opportunities for completeness than they do; thus, they can feel disadvantaged. For instance, those hindered by implicit biases live among people who do not face such disadvantages. The disadvantaged who may struggle to broaden their career prospects can constantly compare themselves with the advantaged. Without this awareness, the disadvantaged would not perceive themselves as such due to the relative nature of the complete life.

Despite its uncertainty, this relativity appears acceptable and in need of no remedy. It would be impractical to define some threshold for a complete life when expectations are variable. If our expected standard of living, achievements, social recognition, and relationships continually change as technology improves and norms evolve, then our threshold for a complete life changes as well. But fortunately, this means society's moral requirement is not as demanding as it may seem. Remember, we do not need to completely eliminate inequality. That is unrealistic, statistically improbable, and beyond the demands of ethical consistency with the deprivation of possibilities. All that is needed to fulfill society's moral requirement is to do as much as possible to equalize inequalities, thereby increasing the opportunities for the disadvantaged to achieve a complete life, whatever the current standard for such a life may be. The moral requirement to improve opportunities is not concerned with a society's statistics or figures but with its intention and effort.

We now have an account of North American society as collectively immoral due to the ethically inconsistent actions of the individuals and groups that compose it. However, we also now know how to rectify that situation to become ethically consistent. Suppose the deprivation of possibilities (or opportunities) is a legitimate harm, and that our society knowingly allows that harm to persist. Then, suppose at least some of those harms are fixable without violating personal autonomy. Refraining from ameliorating those harms is therefore morally wrong. Socioeconomic inequalities limit the opportunities of some while increasing the opportunities of others. As such, it is our society's responsibility to narrow the gap in opportunities so everyone has the potential to achieve a certain standard of completeness in their life. This standard is informed by individuals' perception of themselves compared to others in their society. We must then ask what is generally expected as fundamental features of welfare. Reasonable inclusions within this threshold are things that facilitate certain social goods. These measures include, but are not limited to, access to higher education, access to healthcare, equal and fair wages, and more affordable housing. Improving these fundamentals is realistic without instituting autonomy-violating practices like aggressive wealth redistribution as long as we remember the moral requirement is not absolute eradication of inequality. The goal is to take non-violating steps to maximize the opportunities of those disadvantaged by society. This is the minimum requirement for ethical consistency following from the deprivation of possibilities.

## 5. A Final Objection

As a final but important objection, one may question my reliance on ethical consistency. If an argument could prove that

we should not see the deprivation of possibilities as harmful, then it would not follow that society is morally wrong for perpetuating disadvantageous situations. After all, if there is no harm or intent to harm, then there is no moral wrong. In this case, ethical consistency would not require society to improve citizens' opportunities. So, while I have argued that humanitarian arguments from compassion and natural rights are vulnerable because they generally result in violating personal autonomy, my own argument is potentially vulnerable by relying so heavily on the initial premise that deprivations of possibilities are harmful. However, this argument is amply defensible because it is at least two-horned. I primarily argued that depriving someone of possibilities is harmful because it reduces their opportunities for a complete life, but additionally, as discussed in §3, we also intrinsically benefit from the hope and anticipation generated by indefinite future possibilities. This provides a secondary reason that deprivation of those possibilities would be harmful. So, while I acknowledge the potential vulnerability in my argument and invite critique, both these horns must be addressed in any sufficient response.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

We have seen that if a deprivation of possibilities is harmful, then acts that directly impose that deprivation, *and* failures to act against that deprivation where possible, are morally impermissible. Ethical consistency requires our society to take every plausible measure to increase its disadvantaged citizens' opportunities to live a complete life. From governments down to individuals, we are ethically inconsistent if we allow unnecessary inequalities to continue depriving people of opportunities. This imperative comes solely from the supposition that being deprived of possibilities – or

opportunities – is harmful; this argument does not hinge on any natural right to equality but may be augmented by well-founded arguments for such rights in future works.

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