Chapter 3: Equality

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Some people argue that inequality is natural while others maintain that it is equality which is natural and the inequalities which we notice around us are created by society. Which view do you support? Give reasons.

The second view is more convincing: most inequalities we see are produced by society, not by nature. The chapter separates natural inequalities (differences in talent and capability people are born with) from socially produced ones (arising from unequal opportunity or the exploitation of some groups by others). Many inequalities that looked natural were really social. Women were long called the weaker sex, timid and less intelligent, and this justified denying them equal rights. Colonial masters called Black people in Africa child-like and suited to manual work, and used this belief to defend slavery. These judgements are now seen as the result of power differences between people and nations, not inborn traits. Even real differences need not be fixed: medical science, computers, wheelchairs and artificial limbs help disabled people function effectively, as Stephen Hawking shows. Feminists likewise separate biological sex from socially defined gender roles. Differences of talent will remain, but treatment and opportunities must not be pre-determined by birth or circumstance. So inequality of status and opportunity is largely man-made and can be reduced.

Q2 There is a view that absolute economic equality is neither possible nor desirable. It is argued that the most a society can do is to try and reduce the gaps between the richest and poorest members of society. Do you agree?

Yes, broadly. The chapter notes that absolute equality of wealth or income has probably never existed in any society. People differ in talents, choices and effort, so some will do better than others, and equality does not mean eliminating all differences. What matters is that people have access to basic goods such as education, health care and safe housing, and that treatment and opportunity are not decided by birth. Most democracies therefore provide equal opportunities, so that talented and determined people can improve their condition. Some inequality can then remain without being unjust. The real danger is entrenched inequality that continues over generations. Wealthy classes then keep wealth and power, society divides into permanent rich and poor, resentment and even violence can follow, and reform becomes hard. So a society should narrow the gap between richest and poorest, guarantee minimum conditions of life, and keep inequalities from hardening. Marxists would go further and favour public control of key resources, but the practical aim for most is reducing gaps, not total equality.

Q3 Match the following concepts with appropriate instances: (a) Affirmative action; (b) Equality of opportunity; (c) Equal Rights, with (i) Every adult citizen has a right to vote; (ii) Banks offer higher rate of interest to senior citizen; (iii) Every child should get free education.

(a) Affirmative action matches (ii): banks offering a higher interest rate to senior citizens is a form of special, differential treatment for a particular group, meant to help it. (b) Equality of opportunity matches (iii): free education for every child gives everyone access to a basic good and a fair chance to develop talents and compete. (c) Equal rights matches (i): the right to vote for every adult citizen is a legal, political right given equally to all, whatever their caste, religion, gender or wealth.

Q4 A government report on farmers' problems says that small and marginal farmers cannot get good prices from the market. It recommends that the government should intervene to ensure a better price but only for small and marginal farmers. Is this recommendation consistent with the principle of equality?

Yes, the recommendation is consistent with equality. Equality does not mean treating everyone in an identical manner. Sometimes people must be treated differently so that they can enjoy equal rights and a fair chance. Small and marginal farmers are at a disadvantage in the market and cannot get good prices on equal terms with larger, better-placed sellers. Special help for them is a form of differential treatment that aims to enhance equality, not infringe it, like ramps for disabled people or maternity leave for working women. Such treatment needs justification, and it is justified here because its purpose is to correct a disadvantage and promote a fairer society. It must also not create new dominance or let some group reassert special privileges. Limiting the support to small and marginal farmers, who actually face the problem, keeps it in line with that purpose.

Q5 Which of the following violate the principles of equality? And why? (a) Every child in class will read the text of the play by turn. (b) The Government of Canada encouraged white Europeans to migrate to Canada from the end of the Second World War till 1960. (c) There is a separate railway reservation counter for the senior citizens. (d) Access to some forest areas is reserved for certain tribal communities.

Only (b) violates the principle of equality. (a) Every child reading by turn gives all an equal chance, so it is consistent with equality. (b) Encouraging only white Europeans to migrate discriminates on grounds of race and colour, a distinction the chapter calls unacceptable, because treatment is decided by birth and not by anything people choose. (c) A separate counter for senior citizens is differential treatment justified by their needs, since standing in long queues is harder for them. It enhances equal access rather than violating equality. (d) Reserving access to some forest areas for tribal communities can be justified as special protection for groups whose way of life depends on the forest and who have historically been disadvantaged. Such differential treatment is acceptable when it promotes a just, egalitarian society and is not used for dominance or privilege.

Q6 Here are some arguments in favour of the right to vote for women. Which of these are consistent with the idea of equality? Give reasons. (a) Women are our mothers. We shall not disrespect our mothers by denying them the right to vote. (b) Decisions of the government affect women as well as men, therefore they also should have a say in choosing the rulers. (c) Not granting women the right to vote will cause disharmony in the family. (d) Women constitute half of humanity. You cannot subjugate them for long by denying them the right to vote.

Arguments (b) and (d) are consistent with equality; (a) and (c) are not. (a) rests on respect for women in a particular role, that of mothers. Equality holds that all human beings deserve equal respect and rights because of their common humanity, not because of a family relationship. (b) is consistent: government decisions affect women as much as men, so women, as equal citizens, must have a say in choosing rulers. Equal citizenship brings the right to vote and take part in the affairs of the state. (c) is not consistent: it treats the vote as a matter of family harmony, not of a woman's own right, and implies she may be denied it if men object. (d) is consistent: women are half of humanity with equal worth, and denying them political rights is subjugation that cannot be justified or sustained.