

INEQUALITY AND ITS ECONOMIC ABSURDITY: THE PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS OF BRIAN BARRY

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ABSTRACT

The issue of inequality is not just economic but also social and cultural, requiring a nuanced understanding of its various dimensions and impact on different communities. For instance, Nigeria as a country is indeed facing significant economic hardship which is affecting millions of its citizens. When one is poor, the individual simply lives with fear. Imagine two individuals existed side by side, one had a clean home with everything life can think of, well-furnished house, enjoyed access to quality education, healthcare and job opportunities, and felt secure, safe and valued. In contrast, the other individual struggled to make ends meet. There is limited access to quality education, healthcare, and job opportunities. Here, crime and violence becomes rampant and the feeling of being marginalized and ignored. This highlights the stark contrasts in opportunities, resources and treatment that exist in many societies, perpetuating inequality and social injustice. In many societies, inequality in income, education, and access to resources hinder social mobility and fuel social unrest. The method adopted is hermeneutics so to uncover the underlying principles inequality has placed on man. Tackling inequality is crucial for developing a country and development agencies: as well as being a valuable goal in itself, improving equity constitutes a central place in our understanding of beneficial change and development, driving poverty reduction in combination with growth. A society with less inequality means more people can afford to participate in the economy as consumers, leading to greater demand for products and services, which ultimately benefits businesses and investors.

Keywords: Inequality, Absurdity, Egalitarianism, Universalism.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Introduction

Inequality is a pressing issue that affects millions of people worldwide, perpetuating poverty and limiting opportunities for marginalized communities. Addressing inequality is crucial for building a more just and equitable society where everyone has access to opportunities and resources to reach their full potential. Brian Barry was born on 7th August, 1936 in London. In 1955, he went to Queen's College Oxford to study Economics and Philosophy and graduated in 1958. Brian Barry was a moral and Political Philosopher. He was educated at the Queen's College, Oxford, obtaining the degree of B.A. and D. Phil under the direction of H. L. A. Hart. Along with David Braybrooke, Richard E. Flathman, Felix Oppenheim, and Abraham Kaplan, he was widely credited with having fused analytical Philosophy and Political science. Barry also fused Political theory and social choice theory and was a persistence critic of public choice theory. In 2001, Barry published his fifth book in *Culture and Equality*. Here, he said that a democratic society places all of its citizens on an equal footing allowing no special privileges in law or public policy. In 2005, Brian Barry published his final book, *Why Social Justice Matters*. In 1960, he married Joanna Scroggs and they together had a son Austin. In 1986, he and Joanna separated and in 1987, Barry married Anni Parker. In 2009, Barry died of heart attack in London. The problem of inequality is complex and multifaceted requiring comprehensive approach that addresses its root causes and consequences. According to Brian Barry, the widening gap between the rich and poor is enormous contributing to social division and fragmentation, as the rich and the poor become increasingly disconnected and hostile towards each other. Living in poverty can be a source of significant stress and fear due to the constant struggle to meet basic needs, uncertainty about the future, and limited access to resources. The fear can be pervasive, impacting mental health, well-being, and overall quality of life. Equality is a fundamental concept that plays a crucial role in shaping human development across the lifespan. In the context of human development, equity ensures that individuals have an equal chance to reach their full potential, regardless of their background, socio-economic status, or geographical location. Equality fosters a society where all individuals can thrive and contribute to their communities. Barry argued that equality is not just a matter of fairness; it is a fundamental driver of human development. Equality is central to development. Yet, equity remains low on the policy agenda in many countries especially in Nigeria. This must be down to a lack of political will. Tackling inequalities often requires working against the interests of national elites, challenging vested interests or dominant ideologies, or speaking for people who are excluded and ignored systematically by those making policy. Human capital development was a key element in late president Yar'Adua's Seven Point Agenda. This goal is also not left out in the present administration steered by President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. Consequently, resources have been channeled into the development of the social service sectors of the economy (comprising health, education and other socio-economic services). Despite this recognition and efforts, studies on human capital development as an engine of

economic growth and development in human society are scanty. While many developing countries do not need to wait for the development community to get its act together on equity issues, donors can play a crucial role in influencing development debates and in promoting equity through programme design and policy influence. By promoting equity, societies can unlock the full potential of their citizens and create a more prosperous, just, and sustainable future for all.

To move people into high value-added activities requires at the bottom the implementation of robust social policies in health, education and training.

Barry's Principles Theories of Inequality

Brian Barry's attempt in *Why Social Justice Matters* argues on the importance of social justice. Barry seeks to dismiss the ideological misunderstandings that have prevented recognition of the importance of social justice. He also suggests that a robust conception of social justice will be needed to guide policies that solve the problems of the modern world.

Equality of Opportunity

Barry's philosophic background is highly rooted in liberal egalitarianism which deals on individual rights, equal opportunities as well as fairness. According to Brian Michael Barry, every person should have the same freedom to structure his or her life, and this in the most far-reaching manner possible in a peaceful and appropriate social order. Every effort to interpret the concept of inequality and to apply the principles of equality demands a precise measure of the parameters of equality. He explores its implications in the fields of education and health. For him, inequality has deeper roots in socioeconomic factors. Barry presents ways in which the structure of society undermines equality of opportunity, which changes the way we think and reason. Barry's idea on equality of opportunity which focuses on ensuring equal chances for those with similar talents and willingness to exert effort, can be stretched to a point where it necessitates outcome equality, potentially eroding personal responsibility. This is because in order to achieve genuine equality of opportunity, especially across generation restrictions on inequality arising from individual choices might be necessary which infringes on personal autonomy. For instance, many Nigerians are living in poverty and high food prices disproportionately affect the poor, who spend a significant portion of their income on food. This can lead to food security, malnutrition, and related health issues because Nigeria's economy is heavily dependent on oil, which makes it vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices. When a significant portion of the population lacks access to education, healthcare, and job opportunities, it can lead to a less skilled workforce and reduced productivity. Barry generalized this idea to describe all theories that seek to account for justice in terms of the choices that free and rational individuals would make in some specified situation of choice, where the specification was made by the theorist and not by the persons in the choice situation. Justice as mutual advantage involved the idea that the rules of justice are those that would be agreed upon as promoting the interests of all individuals over some. According to Barry, the difficulty with this construal of justice was that it allowed inequality in initial advantages to be translated into the content of the agreement, a situation that was particularly serious in the case of intergenerational justice, where by definition later generations have nothing to offer earlier generations, and so are vulnerable to the unconstrained choices of those earlier generations. Inequality can exacerbate poverty, as the wealthy elite tend to accumulate more wealth, leaving the poor with limited access to resources. This can lead to a widening gap between the rich and the poor, making it challenging to achieve sustainable economic development. The essence of his position consisted in the republican claim that a democratic society places all of its citizens on an equal footing, allowing no special privileges in law or public policy. Barry was of the view that the widening income inequality is the defining challenge of our time. The gap between the rich and poor is at its highest level over decades. Inequality trends have been more mixed in emerging markets and developing countries (EMDCs), with some countries experiencing declining inequality, but pervasive inequities in access to education, health care, and finance remain. As far as incomes are concerned, report shows unequal distribution. To think that the rich are too well off anyway, the answer is to tax them more highly not to create an inequity between the disabled at any given level of income and others at the same level of income who are not disabled. Similarly, universal child benefit is not aimed at relieving poverty, though at an adequate level it does have the effect of lifting some families out of poverty.

Barry maintained that many of the losses inflicted on the poor people were as a result of deliberate policies adopted by rich countries and the international institutions that control them. The justifiability of inequalities would surely be of less pressing importance if somebody's position in the social hierarchy at a certain time bore no relation to their likely position ten years later. At the same time, greater equality would reduce the importance of being just a little better than the next best candidate, because people's positions in the rank order of incomes would correspond to smaller differences in income. However, a score that measures only intelligence at that level of abstraction simply favours those with a certain kind of puzzle-solving ability over others who may be just as intelligent in any ordinary sense of the word and do just as well or better at real academic subjects. Though, human beings are 'naturally' unequal. The idea of natural inequality saturated ancient Greek thought.

Barry argues that inequality should concern even those who are concerned directly only with poverty in virtue of its impact on politics. This is designed to appeal to people who are unconvinced that social justice has any direct connection with equality, as well as those who accept that it has. In fact, Barry opined that the more unequal a society becomes in terms of income and wealth, the more the connection between wealth and status is tightened, so that people who make valuable contributions to the life of the mind, to the arts, or to the well-being of their fellow citizens, for example teachers and nurses tend to be accorded relatively low social standing unless they also make money.

Positional Goods and Personal Responsibility

Barry explores how the nature of positional goods impacts discussions about social justice and equality. Positional goods are of viable importance, as individuals compete and try to achieve a superior relative position mainly through the consumption of positional goods and services. Those goods whose value depends on how they compare with goods owned by others can be defined as positional goods, while the goods that depend less strongly on such comparisons are called non-positional goods.²⁰ Examples of positional goods include luxury items, exclusive memberships, prestigious education, high-status jobs, and even things like living in a desirable neighborhood. The value of these things is often tied to their relative scarcity and the status they confer. If positional good becomes widely available, its value as a status symbol can diminish. For instance, if everyone could afford a luxury car, it would no longer be as effective at signaling wealth and status. Barry's work on social justice often touches upon the implications of positional goods. He argues that while equality in the distribution of all goods might not be desirable or achievable, focusing on equalizing access to positional goods could be a way to promote fairness and social well-being, especially if inequalities in positional goods have a significant impact on people's lives. With respect to positional goods, worsening the better off is required to better the worse off. Thus, there is reason to "level down" goods such as education and wealth in order to benefit those worse off with respect to the value of those goods. Wealth is a positional good in principle as a means to high relative economic position. However, relative economic position is but one contributor to social standing and self-respect.

Everyone might view themselves as at the upper end of a distribution through the perspective of the particular weights he assigns. The fewer the dimensions, the less the opportunity for an individual successfully to use as a basis for self-esteem a non-uniform weighting strategy that gives greater weight to the dimension he scores highly in.¹

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The phenomenon inequality is a pressing issue that affects millions of people worldwide, perpetuating poverty and limiting opportunities for marginalized communities. The widening gap between the rich and poor is at its highest level for decades. Here, inequality has far-reaching consequences for individuals, communities, and society as a whole. This leads to social mobility, making it harder for the poor to improve their socio-economic status, perpetuating poverty and disadvantage due to limited opportunities and lack of access to quality education while the rich are isolated from the broader community as a result of social unrest and potential threats to their wealth and safety affecting overall well-being. Limited access to resources and opportunities can lead individuals to engage in criminal activities as a means of survival, contributing social division and fragmentation as the rich and the poor become increasingly disconnected and hostile towards each other.

METHODOLOGY

The research work embarks on expository research in order to understand the impact of changes and effective procedures to be adopted. Essentially, materials were sourced from Libraries, Textbooks, Journals, Articles and Encyclopedias. Dictionaries, personal findings and knowledge are of great resources. The philosophical method adopted is hermeneutics. It is a valuable method for this research work because it will help in determining and evaluating the insight of the study. It is essential to interpret, examine and evaluate Barry's position in this research work.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Inequality is one of our most urgent social problems which have recently returned with a vengeance. It is crucial to see the available literatures on this concept (inequality). It becomes necessary and important to make a review of Brian Michael Barry's famous work *Why Social Justice Matters*. Research carried out on this concept suggests that inequality increased almost continuously from the middle Ages until the Industrial Revolution. In this paper, there is need to explore whether this reflects a change in how an unequal distribution of income was perceived.

Brian Barry's views on inequality emphasizes on universalism. Brian Barry's views on inequality are distinct from other philosophers due to his focus on a Universalist, liberal egalitarianism that prioritizes equal treatment and a single, overarching framework for justice, even in pluralistic societies.

Robert E. Goodin, *Why Social Justice is Not All That Matters: Justice as the First Virtue* maintained that the idea of justice is probably more enlightening to accept and that the idea has over time sunk deep roots in each of domains, and to try to make sense of such a wide-ranging concept by identifying elements that are present whenever justice is invoked, but also examining the different forms it takes in various practical contexts. Goodin's work suggests that to achieve social justice, there is need to consider not only the means that is, the primary goods as Barry suggest but also the extent to which individuals can convert those means into their ends (conceptions of the good). This requires a broader perspective that considers freedom, equality, and advantage in a more nuanced way than Rawls did. Goodin argues that the democratic organization of institutions is key to achieving social justice, emphasizing the importance of citizens directly crafting institutions from the bottom-up.

In Barry's view, individuals should be held responsible and accountable for their choices and inequalities resulting from voluntary decisions are justified unlike other theorists who prioritize structural inequalities over personal responsibility, if individuals make voluntary choices for which they are properly held responsible and do not impose on each other or shift costs to each other, then the consequences of these individual voluntary choices that fall on the individuals may be left to lie where they fall. However, Barry's work on equality of opportunity calls for a fundamental re-evaluation of how man structure her societies to ensure that everyone has a genuine chance to succeed, regardless of their background or circumstances.

Implications of the findings of Inequality to the Society

In every society, certain groups have more wealth, education, job opportunities, access to healthcare and other advantages. This creates inequality on a local, national and global scale. Inequality leads to various problems and these problems have significant consequences for individuals and larger society. The fear of the social division and fragmentation between the poor and the rich brings an increasingly disconnection and hostility towards each other which often leads to crime and other dubious activities like kidnapping and killings to make ends meet. In a moment in which fracturing communities need healing, inequality undermines any efforts, driving its big wedge into the ever-growing in between. Inequality leads to a wide range of problems to include social injustice, economic instability, and poor health outcomes increased crime among others. Inequality exacerbates social unrest and conflict particularly when peaceful means of addressing grievances are unavailable or ineffective. In extreme cases, inequalities in wealth, income and opportunities creates feelings of resentment, frustration, and anger among minority groups. In the case of perceived limited access to healthcare and education, the marginalized groups find it difficult to make informed decisions about their health increasing the risk of mortality rates, illness and disease. Inequality distorts and creates an environment where corruption and cronyism thrive, eroding trust and apathy in institutions. Quite a lot of problems are associated with inequality. Limited opportunities reduce access to education, job opportunities and social services. Inequality disregards and violates human dignity, rights and freedoms perpetuating disadvantage and limited social mobility. Inequality creates vicious cycles of poverty that reinforce vulnerabilities and negatively affect those in greatest need, with the potential to create further instability and conflict. Frustrated groups may turn to protests, demonstrations and other forms of social unrest to express their grievances and demand for a change. These might lead to unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, substance abuse and even poor diet as individuals may turn to these behaviors as a coping mechanism. Inequality results in poor living conditions; inadequate housing, poor sanitation, exposure to environmental hazards and other social exclusion increasing health risk. The lower an individual's socio-economic position, the higher their risk of poor health. Poor health limits individuals' ability to work, learn, and fully participate in society. Policies that promote equitable access to healthcare can help reduce these barriers, enabling individuals from lower-income backgrounds to maintain good health and pursue educational and economic opportunities.¹² Countries with larger rich-poor gaps have a higher risk of schizophrenia incidences. Increasing evidence from scientists the world over indicates that many health outcomes everything from life expectancy to infant mortality and obesity can be linked to the level of economic inequality within a given population. Failure to address inequality can have severe consequences for individuals, societies, and the global community. This is because inequality perpetuates intergenerational transmission of poverty and adversely impacts human development. Inequality leads to various problems. High level of inequality hinders economic growth by limiting opportunities for human capital development and reducing aggregate demand. Youth unemployment is particularly alarming where there is inequality leading to frustration, crime, and despair among young people. Inequality in the society contribute to higher crime rates as individuals may feel they have little to lose and may turn to crime as a means of survival in order to improve they economic situation. Again, high inequalities in wealth, income and opportunities can lead to social unrest and tensions, protests and conflicts.

CONCLUSION

While equality means treating everyone the same, equity involves recognizing that different people have different needs and providing resources and opportunities to achieve fair outcomes. Like most parents learn, giving each of their children the same things will not work when one is ill, injured, or disabled. Whether permanent or temporary, the differences have to be addressed. In reality, equity aims to level the playing field so that everyone has a fair chance to succeed, which can benefit society as a whole. A more equitable society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential is possible if we recognize and value the unique contributions of all individuals and communities.

Equity is about striving for improvement and creating a more just and equitable society for all. While that journey is challenging, it is a necessary endeavor in today's increasingly diverse workplaces and society. By understanding that there is no hierarchy of protected classes and addressing the inequities within our control, workplaces that truly embody the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion can be achieved. The intention behind equity is simply to create a fair and just society, but the path to achieving it is complex. In the context of human development, equity is significant because it acknowledges that individuals face different challenges and barriers that can impact their development. Promoting equity in human development requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the unique needs and challenges of different age groups, including investing in early childhood interventions, improving access to quality education and economic opportunities, and ensuring universal healthcare coverage.

When individuals face barriers to development, such as poverty, lack of education, or poor healthcare, they are more likely to experience negative outcomes, including poor health, low educational attainment, and reduced economic opportunities. By promoting equity, we can reduce these inequalities and improve overall well-being. Greater efforts are needed to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, and invest more in health, education, social protection and decent jobs especially for young people, migrants and refugees and other vulnerable communities. Human beings are only alike in dignity that is, having equal claim to basic human rights and equal treatment under the law. Outside of that, however, human beings are different. No one may metaphysically deserve anything especially under tyrannizing image of materialism/naturalism. Freewill, however, is a nice way of idiomatically expressing responsibility. And people can be caused to be better by holding them responsible.

SUGGESTIONS

Inequality to human society requires a commitment to promoting social justice, fairness and equal opportunities for all. This can only be achievable through policy interventions, education, encouraging social and community engagement to help build empathy and understanding and treatment. Education develops human capital, and in turn increases growth and overall employment opportunities.¹⁰ Indeed, education is routinely classified as a public good for its effects on human capital and job creation. Education's value as a means to success on the job market is not solely determined by relative position. The gap between top income earners and low- to middle-income workers has widened, leading to increased economic inequalities. This trend has implications for access to essential resources, such as education and healthcare, which are foundational to social mobility.¹⁵ Poverty may depress citizens' absolute levels of social inclusion by decreasing their access to valued social associations and depriving them of new forms of affiliation and belonging. Poorer societies may simply make fewer communal venues available to their citizens than wealthier societies. Government can implement policies aimed at reducing income inequality, such as progressive taxation, social welfare programs, and investments in education and healthcare. Many familiar forms of social participation are made possible by absolutely high economic standing. Improving fiscal transparency and aligning public spending with development goals can help ensure that resources are allocated effectively to benefit the broader population.

Education is one of the most powerful tools for enhancing social mobility. Access to quality education, from early childhood through higher education, equips individuals with skills needed for upward mobility. Its value is affected by other factors, most notably the supply of jobs, and improving education can improve the supply of jobs by enhancing human capital. Education and health thus have a symbolic relationship just as they both contribute to economic growth and development. While education is often seen as a pathway out of poverty, unequal access to quality education can trap individuals in cycles of disadvantage. Barry argues on the idea that income inequality is solely a result of individual merit and effort. He points out that social structures, such as unequal access to education, healthcare, and social networks, create barriers to opportunity for many individuals. . Looking into literacy and learning gaps are crucial in narrowing the educational gap. In order to achieve this, comprehensive educational reform is necessary. One key aspect of this reform is investing in early childhood education. Also efforts to improve healthcare accessibility should also focus on preventive care and health promotion. By prioritizing early detection and intervention, as well as promoting healthy lifestyles and education,

the burden of disease can be reduced, leading to better health outcomes for all. Research has consistently shown that early childhood education plays a vital role in preparing children for success in school and beyond. By providing high-quality early education programs, we can help bridge the gap and ensure that all children have a strong foundation for learning. Increasing access to quality education and healthcare can help bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, promoting more equitable economic growth. The strength of Barry's views lies in their emphasis on fairness and the moral imperative to address inequality in the society. His ideas encourage policymakers and societies to consider the impact of their decisions on the most vulnerable and to strive for a more equitable distribution of resources. By addressing poverty and inequality, individuals are less likely to turn to crime out of desperation. Equal access to education and employment can reduce crime by providing alternatives. Economic absurdity of inequality is a complex issue that requires a multifaceted solution, including economic reforms, investment in human capital, and social safety nets to protect the most vulnerable citizens.

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