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Introduction

ECONOMIC INEQUALITY HAS BEEN STEADILY growing for the past few decades—in the United States and in much of the developed world. According to a database maintained by the economists Thomas Blanchet, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman, whereas the poorest 50 percent of Americans have seen their wealth grow an average of \$12,000 per household since 1976—scarcely enough to cover a single major medical crisis without insurance, far less than one year of college tuition—those occupying the top 10 percent have seen their wealth grow by nearly \$3 million. Those in the top 1 percent have seen their wealth grow by \$16 million. Those in the top 0.1 percent have seen theirs grow by \$85 million. And those occupying the top 0.01 percent have seen their net wealth grow by \$440 million per household.¹ If anything, the pace of inequality's growth appears to be accelerating. Per Oxfam, over a recent two-year period, billionaires across the globe have seen their fortunes grow more than they did in the previous twenty-three years combined, such that now the world's wealthiest ten individuals have more than the poorest 40 percent of humanity.² Elon Musk alone saw his wealth grow from \$25 billion to more than \$200 billion over the course of a few years.³ Per data available from the Federal Reserve, the top 1 percent of Americans in 2020 held more than fifteen times the wealth of the bottom 50 percent of all Americans.⁴

The French economist Thomas Piketty has documented economic inequality's steady rise over the past five decades.⁵ After a period of lower inequality following World War II, changes in taxation, regulation, and other policies led to a significant shift of resources from the poorest citizens to the wealthiest. From the 1980s to the 2000s, almost the entire growth in household wealth belonged to the richest 20 percent of

Americans, two-thirds of that to the top 1 percent alone.⁶ By 2018, economic inequality in the United States was greater than any time since the 1920s.⁷ And as even casual observers have noted, this growth in inequality has corresponded to a growth in authoritarian populist movements, social distrust, and political instability.

Yet as historian Walter Scheidel notes, although extreme inequality may feel relatively new, it has historically been the norm: “Inequality either grew or held fairly steady for much of recorded history, and significant reductions have been rare.”⁸ Or as political scientist Charles Lindblom observed a generation earlier, “Historically, all societies, market or not, have preserved economic inequality.”⁹ Despite this, relatively little attention has been drawn to what historical sources have been saying about inequality all along. Although it may feel to some that consciousness of inequality and its dire effects is recent in origin, the fact is that it extends back as long as philosophers have been thinking about politics. Philosophers, including the most canonical ones in the Western tradition, have expressed concerns about inequality this whole time, often right underneath our noses. While almost every undergraduate philosophy major knows about Plato’s philosopher rulers, for example, few realize that he identifies economic inequality as among the greatest threats to any thriving republic. While almost everyone who has taken an introduction to political theory course in college knows that Thomas Hobbes advocated for absolute sovereignty as the best path to a peaceful commonwealth, few know that, for him, inequality is one of the commonwealth’s greatest threats. While almost everyone knows Adam Smith’s role as an early advocate of market economies, few know that, for him, inequality threatens to divide citizens anywhere it is allowed to exist. And while many know John Stuart Mill as the definitive champion of individual liberty, few know that, for him, liberty needs to be balanced with a healthy degree of economic equality. We have been reading these thinkers for a long time, yet there is so much still they can teach us about what many consider to be the defining economic, social, and political challenge of our age. Recovering their largely forgotten wisdom about inequality is the aim of this book.

Inequality’s persistence and effects on social and political stability is, as Sigmund Freud once observed, both “flagrant” and has “always been recognized.” Indeed, as the Viennese psychiatrist continued, “It is to be expected that . . . underprivileged classes will envy the favored ones their privileges and will do all they can to free themselves from their own surplus of privation. Where this is not possible, a permanent measure of discontent will persist within the culture concerned and this can lead to

dangerous revolts.”¹⁰ For Freud, this was common sense and had long been understood as such.

The escaped slave and orator Frederick Douglass expressly acknowledged this tradition by citing the mythical ancient Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus (treated in chapter 1 of this book), who was “fully justified in the extreme measures he adopted,” including in his confiscation and equal redistribution of all private wealth to secure his citizens’ liberties. Drawing on his knowledge of this tradition within Western thought, Douglass observed, “Wherever the palaces tower highest, and enclose within their walls the greatest accumulations of luxury and wealth, there does the peasant grovel lowest in ignorance and misery; there is tyranny most secure and freedom most hopeless.”¹¹ Economic inequality, for him, was the foundation of abject poverty, mass ignorance, and despotism. For Douglass, this meant, among other things, that the freedom of American slaves would have to be accompanied by real economic equality rather than gestures to mere legal equality—a point also found in the same Plutarch’s *Lives* where Douglass discovered Lycurgus: “for a mere law to give all men equal rights is but useless, if the poor must sacrifice those rights to their debts, and, in the very seats and sanctuaries of equality, the courts of justice, the offices of state, and the public discussions, be more than anywhere at the beck and bidding of the rich.”¹² For Plutarch’s ancient Greek lawgivers and for Douglass, legal, social, and political equality must proceed from a foundation of economic equality.

The point, however, is this: both Douglass and Freud were fully aware of this long Western tradition of criticizing economic inequality. Yet much of this tradition has been neglected, to our own detriment. Those who find economic inequality troubling today would benefit from an awareness of this tradition, as did Freud and Douglass. Not only would standing on the shoulders of giants offer greater confidence, but the tradition furnishes powerful arguments against inequality—arguments largely unknown today. This book traces the history of inequality through seven central figures in this tradition—Plato, Jesus,¹³ Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Karl Marx¹⁴—and in doing so, promises not only to provide a richer intellectual history but also to enrich our understanding of inequality more generally.

A book of this nature requires justifying the choice of texts under consideration. Why these seven figures and not others? I choose them primarily for the most obvious reason: they are familiar. Almost everyone across the world has heard of Jesus. And much of the educated world

has some passing familiarity with some combination of the rest. Anyone who has taken an undergraduate introductory course in philosophy, political theory, or intellectual history has likely read some of them. Yet despite their familiarity, most of these figures are known for reasons other than their attention to economic inequality. Plato, for example, is familiar mostly as an advocate of philosopher rulers and political hierarchy, as found in his *Republic*. Thomas Hobbes is mostly familiar for his depiction of the state of nature as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Adam Smith is familiar to most as the “godfather of capitalism.” These are three of the most celebrated thinkers in the Western intellectual tradition. And despite this, even as they continue to be read and discussed broadly, vanishingly little consideration is given to what they have to say about inequality despite the issue’s pressing contemporary salience.

We have been reading these philosophers and figures for hundreds if not thousands of years, and in many cases we have not yet begun to appreciate how remarkably relevant they remain. I say this because they do not merely declare that inequality is “bad” and move on to their next point. They rather take pains to explain exactly *why* inequality is problematic. In explaining their reasoning, these seven figures perform a remarkable service for those grappling with inequality—a critical disposition too often assumed and unargued. Take, for example, Thomas Piketty’s magisterial *Capital in the 21st Century*. He condemns inequality as “excessive,” “shameful,” “beyond all reasonable limits,” “terrifying,” engendering a “feeling of dispossession,” threatening “democratic sovereignty” and “the values of social justice,” risking a “drift toward oligarchy,” and in some regions representing “unprecedented levels of injustice.”¹⁵ Yet other than passing references to John Rawls and Amartya Sen, he does not elaborate. In this respect, he follows a pattern adopted by many activists, journalists, and public officials. Although many condemn inequality, few elaborate substantially on *why* it might be problematic. This is not a critique of Piketty’s accomplishments, which represent essential descriptive work on inequality’s trajectory over time and its tendency to emerge in capitalist economies. But it is to suggest the work left undone—or rather ignored and unappreciated.

The fact that many contemporary opponents of inequality have failed to outline *why* inequality is problematic has become fodder for a presumption that inequality’s critics are merely giving vent to their *resentment* against and *envy* of the wealthy—that they express the vices of small-minded people more than legitimate moral or political concerns.¹⁶ For economist Deirdre McCloskey, efforts to ameliorate inequality are merely

manifestations of “an insatiable envy.”¹⁷ On such accounts, inequality’s critics might be better served in getting counsel from a therapist or a clergy member, who might cure them of their envy, than in wasting their efforts on critiquing inequality.

This is reason enough to return to canonical texts. Because even though it may be possible for some to dismiss various frustrations expressed about inequality, it would be more difficult and perhaps irresponsible to ignore the arguments of the figures in this book. This is true for at least two reasons: first, precisely because *they provide arguments* and second, because we have already been taking these thinkers seriously for centuries. Their objections to inequality are difficult to dismiss as expressions of resentment or envy. They are, rather, anchored in profoundly influential political theories (and in Jesus’s case, theology). And they argue with striking consensus that excessive inequality threatens to divide communities, pit citizens against one another, undermine democratic legitimacy, and, in the most extreme cases, even foment revolution. Rather than dismissing complaints about inequality as expressions of the vice of envy, they argue that inequality results from other vexing vices, including greed (*pleonexia*), injustice, intemperance, selfishness, and impiety. If they are right, then maybe contemporary scholars have been focusing on the wrong vices.

Further, these canonical texts put us in conversation with much contemporary political philosophy and economics, especially the school known as “sufficientarianism,” which holds that although poverty is a genuine moral problem, concentrated wealth and inequality are morally irrelevant. Scholars and journalists such as Steven Pinker, Tyler Cowen, and David Brooks, among others, argue that so long as the poor are fed, housed, and clothed, there should be little concern with the wealthy. The economist Cowen, for example, has recently insisted that we should “fight poverty, not inequality.”¹⁸ Yet Cowen has elsewhere venerated Plato and Mill, apparently unaware that these two thinkers are among the most strenuous objectors not merely to poverty but to excessive wealth and inequality. Similarly, while *New York Times* columnist David Brooks acknowledges that something should be done to help the poor, he insists that attention to inequality is distracting and “*needlessly polarizes*” current political debates. Yet elsewhere he has pleaded that more people should be reading Plutarch for instructive lessons today—the same Plutarch who depicted harrowing stories of economic inequality in the ancient world and inspired Frederick Douglass to fight inequality in his own times.¹⁹ Careful study of the history of political thought reveals arguments that squarely challenge many today, especially the sufficientarians. If sufficientarians are to

maintain their claim that inequality is morally unproblematic, they should have to confront and refute the arguments of the canonical philosophers that, in many cases, they claim most to admire.

Much of what follows will be surprising to some on both the political right and left. Many conservatives casually assume that the Western canon uniformly endorses concentrated wealth as the result of just exchanges over time. Free-market economist and advocate Milton Friedman, for example, treated economic egalitarianism as largely an invention of twentieth-century liberals.²⁰ It had not occurred to him that there was an extended tradition of serious objections to inequality extending back to antiquity. Friedrich Hayek similarly describes socialism and egalitarianism as representing a “sharp . . . break not only with the recent past but with the whole evolution of Western civilization . . . as it has grown from the foundations laid by Christianity and the Greeks.”²¹ For Hayek, the Western canon, if anything, uniformly supports inequality. Many on the left, for related reasons, too often assume that the canon stands opposed to egalitarian principles. If the “great books” have failed adequately as critics of inequality on other dimensions, so the argument goes, what reasons do they offer to believe that those books provide worthy insights into the economic sphere? Who is *Plato*, of all people, to teach contemporary liberals about *equality*? Scrupulous examination of these texts with an eye to economic inequality suggests Plato and others can teach a great deal. In coming to appreciate this, we have fresh reasons to read these familiar books yet again.

Examining these texts on inequality reveals a general and undeniable pattern: inequality is not incidental to any of these thinkers. I have not written a book to draw attention to scattered and disconnected observations on inequality. I am arguing something much more. For these thinkers, inequality threatens their greatest moral, political, and sometimes theological ambitions. Furthermore, this trend persists despite their disparate ambitions or goals. The seven figures under consideration here represent a philosophically diverse group, including a classical republican, the founding figure of Christianity, an early modern republican, a classical liberal, a utilitarian, and a communist, as well as Hobbes, who seems to defy labels. Plato, for example, aims to create a community of civic harmony and friendship. Jesus seeks to promote the love of God and love of neighbor. Hobbes sought to secure peace. Rousseau’s republic aims to realize the general will. Smith ardently desires mutual sympathy. Mill pursues utility. And Marx seeks to free the proletariat from bourgeois domination.

Remarkably, they all want something different in their political and moral theories, yet they all clearly understand inequality as a threat to their respective goals. Although Rousseau and Marx are surely the best-known critics of inequality in this book, their concerns about inequality are hardly historically unique. They are instead part of a larger tradition that understands inequality to be socially and politically disruptive, if not downright antagonistic, to thriving states. It thus becomes harder to dismiss their concerns about inequality as idiosyncratic musings. Rather, this suggests that thinking about inequality has been intrinsic to political philosophy itself. The nature of inequality requires that political philosophy engage and address it lest its effects undermine the greatest ambitions for political communities, almost regardless of what those ambitions might be. To proceed otherwise, indifferent to inequality, would be to dismiss canonical wisdom.

It is important to establish what this book is and what it is not. This is a book about *economic* inequality in the history of political thought. It is not a book about all forms of inequality. A larger work on inequality would necessarily have to address social, political, gender, racial, religious, and other inequalities in addition to economic inequality. In writing this book, I do not want to argue that those inequalities are somehow less important or even independent of economic inequality. Economic equality often coexists with other pervasive inequalities.²² It is no secret, for example, that Plato and Hobbes embrace antidemocratic political inequalities. Yet one can be a committed economic egalitarian while holding inegalitarian views on other dimensions. I restrict my inquiry in this book to *economic inequality* only in order to highlight a largely ignored theme in the history of political thought. It is my hope that other scholars will explore the important connections among these various forms of inequality. These relationships are complex and deserve greater study.

Why this *humanistic* account of inequality when there are countless impressive and important empirical studies on inequality by political scientists, sociologists, and economists? Should that not be enough?²³ Why study the *historical ideas* associated with inequality? As Siep Sturman has pressed, “ideas matter and canonized ideas matter a lot.”²⁴ Ideas often communicate elements of the experience of inequality unexamined in quantitative studies.²⁵ It is one thing to know the extent of inequality. It is another thing to contemplate how it affects rich and poor alike and, further, how it affects political communities more broadly. A

benefit of humanistic approaches is the attempt to flesh out the quantitative accounts of inequality with portraits of unequal societies, such as those discussed in the texts studied in this book. A further benefit to humanistic approaches to inequality is the range of arguments available to critique it. An empirical study can tell readers *how much* inequality might exist, but humanistic accounts can reveal whether that degree of inequality is *morally* or *politically alarming* and *why*. Through these canonical thinkers, we are compelled to ponder inequality not just empirically but as it affects our morals, our religious commitments, our relationship with the rule of law, our democratic institutions, and our connections with our neighbors, employers, and coworkers. As Piketty has himself rightly insisted, economics must be supplemented by other disciplinary approaches when studying inequality: “Social scientific research is and always will be tentative and imperfect.” A broad approach, however, drawing on sources from across the social sciences and humanities, can “help to redefine the terms of debate, unmask certain preconceived or fraudulent notions, and subject all positions to constant critical scrutiny.”²⁶ This book explores a range of humanistic accounts across a vast historical span that helps to round out our understanding of inequality and perhaps even better grasp the lived experience of inequality. To the extent that thinkers from Plato to Marx provide a normative vocabulary to account for the experience of inequality, their voices are worth hearing.

Further, even though my book studies seven varied historical figures, it is not comprehensive. I realize there is much more to be said about and learned from the history of political thought on this topic. Much can be said about inequality in Aristotle, Cicero, More, Bodin, Harrington, Bacon, Hume, Grouchy, Wollstonecraft, Freud, Rawls, and many others. The fact that I have not written about them here does not suggest otherwise. But one must draw lines somewhere to make a scholarly project manageable. I have selected thinkers who provide some diversity in viewpoints, points of emphasis, and epochs. I hope this book provides a sense of the range of engagements with inequality over a significant period of time, but I remain fully aware that it is merely a sampling of a much greater range of studies. In short, there is more work to be done on economic inequality in the history of political thought.

Moreover, this is a book on Western political thought and not a book on political thought more globally. This limitation is for practical reasons: to engage in a study of inequality across cultures would be to expand its scope beyond my present scholarly abilities. There is much to be learned from engaging with non-Western writings on inequality, as even a small sampling

makes clear. Confucius observed, for example, that a wise ruler “worries not about poverty but about uneven distribution”; Lao Tzu cautioned against those “possessed of too much wealth”; Gandhi lamented that “the contrast between the rich and the poor today is a painful sight.”²⁷ There has already been some engagement with their ideas, and doubtless these inquiries should expand in the coming years.

Although this book addresses various remedies for economic inequality, this is not a book of policy prescriptions for at least two reasons. First, in some cases the remedies are beyond what the current political climate can entertain. While Rousseau’s proposal for the island nation of Corsica to abolish currency might succeed in radically reducing inequality, for example, such a proposal would almost surely fall on deaf ears. Second, it is difficult to know to what degree the prescriptions advocated by various figures in this book rely on underlying inequalities rightfully rejected today. For example, although Plato’s arguments in the *Laws* for greater equality through trade restrictions might surely appeal to some, his solution assumed an underlying slave class. I do not know to what degree his conception of equality rested on that underlying inequality, but I know enough to suggest that at the very least we ought to confront his acceptance of slavery before adopting his prescriptions for addressing economic inequality. This being said, it is not wrong to entertain some of the remedies more broadly. Would it make sense to raise luxury taxes, as Rousseau recommended? Would it make sense to impose a steep estate tax, as Mill suggested? Would it help to educate children vigorously against the dangers of the base selfishness that exacerbate inequality, as advocated by Plato, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Mill? These remedies merit consideration. And to this degree, it is not out of place to evoke historical ideas in pondering our own problems. One must draw from the past with caution, but at the same time it is not implausible that some of those ideas might very well inform contemporary discussions. And even if we did not think any of their remedies were especially applicable today, current debates about inequality would be richer if we endeavored to understand them. Even if we know that Rousseau’s plan to eliminate currency and commerce is impracticable in today’s large societies, understanding his engagement with inequality can inform a deeper understanding of the nature and experience of inequality. And deeper understandings, one hopes, ultimately inspire more thoughtful remedies.

A common question I encountered while writing this book is why I have sometimes focused on the problematization of *concentrated wealth* rather than *inequality* specifically. Are not wealth and inequality two

separate matters? I do not think that they are, for three reasons. First, “economic inequality” was not a term in broad use until after Rousseau. If one were to address only thinkers who used that term, it would exclude almost everyone before him. Such a book could surely be written. But it is also clear that many thinkers preceding Rousseau addressed inequality, only with slightly different vocabulary, often speaking of the related matters of poverty and concentrated wealth. They belong in this history.

The second reason also relates to Rousseau, who once observed, “money is a sign which has a genuine effect only by the inequality of distribution. . . . It is useful only as a sign of inequality” (*Corsica*, 140). “Money” as Rousseau uses the term here is wealth, which is useful primarily as it distinguishes the rich from the middle class or the poor. Or as he explains elsewhere, “the words poor and rich are relative, and wherever men are equal there is neither rich nor poor” (*Observations*, 45).²⁸ Noted political theorist and Rousseau scholar Judith Shklar has echoed, “Wealth is a relative notion whose meaning depends on the existence of poverty.”²⁹ I often focus on concentrated wealth in these texts as a marker of inequality, just as Rousseau and Shklar assume, because “wealth” only makes sense where some have much and others do not. To speak of haves and have-nots in this fashion is to speak of inequality. Although Plato, Jesus, and Hobbes, for example, do not use the term “inequality,” we should not assume they are unconcerned with inequality. Rather, for reasons that will emerge, they very much are.

The third reason I often focus on concentrated wealth, even more than on desperate poverty, is that it is the defining feature of inequality for much of the developed world today. In the United States, for example, Lyndon Johnson announced a War on Poverty in 1964, endeavoring to eradicate desperate poverty. Although this program has been subjected to steady criticism, it is largely inarguable that this series of antipoverty measures coincided with a significant decrease in the desperate poverty associated with malnourishment, homelessness, and lack of access to health care. Medicaid and school lunches, for example, have alleviated some of the worst burdens of absolute poverty. And perhaps resulting from these programs, the rate of absolute poverty in the United States has dropped from 22.4 percent in 1959 to somewhere between 11 percent and 15 percent since the War on Poverty was declared.³⁰ Yet inequality has nevertheless soared over this same period. As an example, in 1965, the average CEO earned 21.1 times as much as a typical worker at the same company. By 1978, that number grew to 31.4 times; by 1989, it was 61.4 times. The average CEO in 2021 earned 351.1 times as much as a typical worker at the same company.³¹ As legal scholar Daniel Markovits has recently insisted, “Economic

inequality now distinctly concerns not poverty but wealth.”³² Although I certainly address poverty as described by various thinkers, their descriptions of excessive wealth are arguably even more relevant when pondering inequality today.

I note here that unless otherwise expressly stated, when speaking of “economic inequality,” I mean what economists sometimes call “wealth inequality,” as opposed to “income inequality.” Although income and wealth are often strongly correlated, sometimes they are not. For example, one reason that many billionaires pay relatively low taxes today is because they technically have little income. Rather, their wealth is tied to unrealized capital gains (such as large stock holdings) and enjoyed by borrowing against those assets to fund lavish lifestyles. Although they are surely wealthy by any other definition, they are not “high-income earners,” at least in any fashion that meaningfully reflects their vast assets. Further and perhaps most relevant to this book, for much of the tradition of political thought, the notion of “income” is insignificant in comparison with wealth. Those thinkers addressed here are unconcerned with how much money anyone has earned over a single year compared with overall financial standing. Finally, accumulated wealth is simply more consequential than annual income insofar as it considers the compounding effects of inequality over generations. Rousseau was the first major philosopher to comment on this in his *Discourse on Inequality*, but it remains salient today, especially among those interested in understanding how economic and racial inequality interact and reinforce each other.³³ Income provides a proxy for inequality, perhaps, but wealth reveals inequality’s structural and enduring impacts.

A final general consideration in this introduction: Why speak of a “plague” in the title? Some readers, in the wake of a historic global pandemic, might object to this book’s title, *The Greatest of All Plagues*, hyperalert to the unpleasant realities of an actual plague rather than a metaphorical one. The book title comes from Plato’s Athenian Stranger in the *Laws*, and it requires clarification. Strictly speaking, the “greatest of all plagues” for Plato is civil war, which he understands to be the inevitable outcome of significant economic inequality (*Laws*, 744d). Since civil war is a necessary consequence of extreme economic inequality in Plato’s account, I do not draw a sharp distinction between them. This connection between inequality and political divisions with the possibility of those divisions degenerating into civil strife is a persistent theme throughout Western political thought—from Plato to Jesus’s “house divided” all the way to Marx’s class antagonisms culminating in revolution. Although Plato was the first to describe inequality as resulting in this kind of plague, he was far from the last.

Why would Plato refer to the effects of inequality as the greatest of all plagues, especially as an ancient Athenian citizen, who as a child witnessed a historic plague himself? To answer this, we should examine Thucydides and the history of Plato's Athens. To be sure, the plague was physiologically devastating, but arguably more dramatic was its effect on Athenian society itself, which became a community in which citizens abandoned moral restraint and remorselessly turned on one another. Thucydides's readers know that Athens was characterized by economic inequality during the Peloponnesian War, as manifested in a series of class-based revolutions, even though it was less economically divided than most other Greek city-states at the time. It is quite possible that a plague of this nature, though miserable in any context, was worse in an economically and socially divided society. Recall that for Plato, who was raised during the war, cities marked by radical inequality are two cities rather than one—"a city of the poor and one of the rich" (*Republic*, 551d). In this context, it may be easier to understand or at least contextualize the particular failures of Athens during the plague. Indeed, many suspect that this relationship of inequality and political turmoil has been true in the United States and other unequal societies throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Consider the tumult of the past decade—police killings of citizens, protests, riots, fights over vaccine and masking policies, heightened partisanship, flirtations with authoritarianism, and even insurrection. Would America have been spared all of this were it not already suffering from significant inequality? I cannot say for certain. But neither do I see any reason to ignore Plato's admonition that inequality fosters pathological divisiveness—the worst of plagues, as it makes every other setback, including pandemics, more burdensome.

My chapters follow a general pattern. I first sketch some historical background for each thinker to provide context and perhaps some insight into what might have made inequality salient. Then I identify the general ambitions of those figures and their respective moral, political, and, in the case of Jesus, religious thought. I next depict the nature and effects of inequality as understood by each figure studied in this book. This includes attention to the effects of inequality on the rich and poor as individuals and then a description of inequality's broader social and political effects. Finally, I outline what they think could or should be done about inequality. In some cases, as with Plato, Rousseau, Mill, and Marx, these solutions will have been expressly presented as such by the authors themselves. In other cases, I draw from their arguments to see what resources they offer—in the context of their own thought—to combat the problems

they have described. I have labored not to take excess liberty in constructing their remedies.

The first substantive chapter addresses Plato, since he is the first major political philosopher in the Western tradition. He will be among the most unexpected figures included in this book because he is typically understood as radically inegalitarian. This is not wrong, at least insofar as one considers Socrates's politics in Plato's *Republic*—a city-state in which all political power is concentrated in the hands of a few supremely virtuous philosophers. Yet embedded throughout this familiar text is a systemic critique of economic inequality. To appreciate why inequality worries Plato, it is necessary to understand what I take to be his overarching goal, as shared in his two major political dialogues, the *Republic* and the *Laws*. The primary interlocutors in those dialogues, Socrates and the Athenian Stranger, respectively, both insist on the centrality of civic harmony, friendship, and fraternal bonds. Understanding his commitment to civic harmony in the dialogues reveals how Plato's exploration of inequality discloses myriad moral and social concerns. His *Republic* is peppered with passages detailing these problems. Yet it is in his later dialogue, the *Laws*, where he most extensively interrogates the pathologies of inequality, according to his Athenian Stranger, which extend to faction, disharmony, and civil war. The Stranger considers many measures to treat the malady of inequality, broadly divided into two approaches: ideal and practical. The ideal solution, applicable primarily to unsettled, new communities lacking a history of inequality, is to distribute wealth such that the richest citizens have no more than four times the wealth of the poorest. But for settled cities, already burdened by inequality, such measures would alienate and divide citizens more than they would harmonize them. This does not lead Plato to argue, however, that inequality is off-limits for legislators. It *must* be reduced but only gradually and incrementally by patient persuasion of the wealthiest citizens that their city would be improved if only wealth were more widely dispersed.

The second chapter addresses what can be learned about economic inequality from the New Testament. Understanding its lessons requires understanding the nature of inequality as found in Jesus's Roman Palestine, a community characterized by extreme wealth contrasted with extreme poverty. It further necessitates understanding the Hebrew laws of Sabbatical and Jubilee, which required, among other measures, that all debts be forgiven once every seven years and all property restored to an equitable distribution once every half century. Emerging from this Jewish context, Jesus insists on the love of God as the highest aspiration for his

disciples. Yet the love of money hinders divine love—one can love God *or* mammon. He appeals to Jewish law and tradition to celebrate the poor and scorn the rich, culminating in his pronouncement of a “year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:19), a Jubilee year in which debts must be forgiven and property be redistributed.

The third chapter treats Thomas Hobbes, who like Plato is rarely understood as an egalitarian. He is typically interpreted as a philosopher desperate to distance society from the unhealthy equality in the state of nature that is synonymous with civil war. The state of nature is after all a state of “equality,” which gives rise to competition, diffidence, and ultimately war—Hobbes’s greatest evil. His highest good, therefore, such as it is, is his first law of nature, peace, which can only be achieved by concentrating all civic authority in the hands of a sovereign or “Leviathan.” Yet this Leviathan, to protect subjects, must fend off all competitors for sovereign authority—and among the greatest threats to that authority are the wealthy, riches “gathered in too much abundance in one or a few private men” (*Leviathan*, 29.19). For Hobbes, great poverty results in “*resentment* and *envy*,” which in turn “are the sources of sedition and war” (*Citizen*, 5.5); concentrated wealth generates a “presumption of impunity” inconsistent with the rule of law (*Leviathan*, 27.30). He allows that the Leviathan may distribute or redistribute property to prevent these extremes, hence protecting the peace that is his ultimate goal.

The inclusion of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in chapter 4 will be less surprising to most readers since he authored the celebrated *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. The Genevan autodidact diagnosed inequality in the context of an emerging market economy, where myriad inequalities are ultimately reduced to the inequality of wealth, since it is with riches that one can purchase all other sources of distinction, such as power and public esteem. Perhaps more than anyone, Rousseau probes what he takes to be the pathologies of economic inequality, which makes “all men competitors, rivals, or rather enemies.” The inevitable outcome of inequality, as he understands it, is a “handful of powerful and rich men at the pinnacle of greatness and fortune, while the masses grovel in obscurity and misery.” The former soon find that their greatest pleasures come from flamboyantly enjoying things they know to be beyond the reach of others (*SD*, 184). This inequality is a direct affront to Rousseau’s highest political value, the general will, which tends “to equality” (*SC*, 2.1, 59).³⁴ It is therefore one of the chief objectives of civil government, according to Rousseau, to distribute wealth such that no citizen has either too much or too little. But like Plato, he understands that some communities will be better

prepared for equality than others. For those republics relatively uncorrupted by both luxury and inequality, like Corsica, currency and commerce can be mostly banned to obviate inequality. But even for societies already corrupted by commerce and inequality, stringent capitation and luxury taxes must be employed to slowly promote greater equality. “Taxes such as these, which relieve poverty and burden riches,” he insists, “are the way to forestall the ever-widening inequality of fortunes” (*PE*, 36).

For many readers, the inclusion of Adam Smith in a book about historical criticisms of poverty and inequality will be a surprise. Yet in chapter 5, I draw on a growing body of literature of Smith studies to sketch the Scottish philosopher and political economist as among the most powerful critics of both poverty and inequality, as they tend to undermine his declared goal of promoting “mutual sympathy,” as described early in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Not only does poverty rob its victims of necessities, but he also insists that it demoralizes them, making them feel shame, rendering them objects “nobody thinks it is worth while to look at” (*TMS*, 63, 68). Smith worries that inequality emboldens the rich, marginalizes the poor, and fosters both legal and moral codes structured to benefit the rich and punish the poor systematically. Great wealth inflames the rich with vanity and inspires an unhealthy selfishness. At the same time, as he observes in his *Wealth of Nations*, the “affluence of the rich excites the indignation of the poor, who are often driven by want, and prompted by envy, to invade his possessions” (*WN*, 710). Smith’s concerns about inequality are indisputable. Yet his solutions to inequality raise questions about whether they are adequate to the problems he outlined. Although he allows a degree of progressive taxation and other modest measures, he ultimately invests greater effort in ameliorating poverty through a growing economy and presumably growing wages, even as wealthy employers grow richer.

John Stuart Mill is another British political economist with a reputation for free market enthusiasm, who yet represents a stern critic of inequality. He is perhaps best known as a proponent of the principle of utility that prioritizes promoting the greatest happiness of the community. I explore his critique of inequality and his analysis of how it undermines utility in chapter 6. For him, inequality corrupts the rich and poor alike, rendering the former selfish brutes and the latter desperate, malnourished victims, increasingly tempted by circumstances to satisfy their needs through crime. At the root of these problems, for Mill, is how inequality inflames selfishness. As he laments in his *Principles of Political Economy*, “All privileged and powerful classes, as such, have used their power in the interest of their own selfishness, and have indulged their self-importance in

despising, and not in lovingly caring for, those who were, in their estimation, degraded, by being under the necessity of working for their benefit.” The selfishness bred in unequal societies turns rich and poor against one another, such that it “will sooner or later become insupportable to the employing classes, to live in close and hourly contact with persons whose interests and feelings are in hostility to them” (*Principles*, 760, 767). Mill explores several solutions to address the maladies he associates with inequality, including worker cooperatives, an education program to discourage the underlying selfishness, and a steep inheritance tax aimed at the radical redistribution of resources.

The final philosopher under consideration is Karl Marx, who represents the logical culmination of this narrative insofar as he is broadly understood to be the West’s greatest critic of inequality. He is surely the most obvious figure to appear in this book. Yet there has never hitherto been a systematic study of his treatment of economic inequality—its origins, causes, effects, and remedies. Chapter 7 begins by acknowledging his highest political aspiration, which is to free the proletariat from domination by the bourgeoisie, and proceeds to explain how intrinsic economic inequality is to maintaining that domination. I focus on many passages largely ignored by nonspecialists, including his discussion of the myth underlying inequality that justifies capitalism—that the rich are industrious and virtuous while the poor are lazy and shiftless—as well as the brutally violent acts involved in colonialism and slavery that ignited bourgeois inequality. The chapter further explores, through careful exposition of *Capital*, the ways in which inequality affects both rich and poor, physically and morally. It also untangles the sometimes-confusing fact that Marx often speaks ill of “equality,” associating it with bourgeois notions of legal equality that are perversely used to justify radical economic inequality in capitalist economies. The chapter concludes with careful attention to his remedy, arguably the most radical one offered by any figure treated in this book: overturning the economic system itself. Although it is wrong, as some have suggested, to assume that Marx endorses violent revolution in all cases as a means for shaking off capitalism and the inequalities inevitably attached to it, he nevertheless is committed to overturning the economies and the societies they support—and sometimes, for Marx, this will require force.

The various approaches to understanding, problematizing, and addressing inequality will of course vary from figure to figure. Plato, for example, is deeply concerned about the effects of inequality on individual souls. Marx is concerned about how inequality leads to domination and, further, inhibits individual freedom. Each thinker needs to be understood in his

own terms. This being said, there are many themes that recur throughout. Prominent among these is greed or *pleonexia*, which is found in Plato and Marx, as well as in most of these thinkers. The insatiable greed they describe plays a significant role in the growth of inequality, and for many thinkers in this book, its suppression represents a significant goal. Another recurrent theme is the importance of achieving what is variously described as civic friendship, harmony, fraternity, or what John Stuart Mill calls, “unity with our fellow creatures” (*Utilitarianism*, 32). Nearly every thinker discussed at length in this book has an objective along these lines, and virtually all of them understand extreme inequality to threaten this goal. As Plato insisted, “If (as we presume) the city must avoid the greatest of all plagues, which has been more correctly termed ‘civil war’ than ‘faction,’ then neither harsh poverty nor wealth should exist among any of its citizens. For both these conditions breed both civil war and faction” (*Laws*, 744d). A necessary condition for escaping faction and civil war over the long run, for Plato and many others, is to limit inequality to foster a community of shared interests and affective bonds. The more inequality, the more at odds are the various citizens and the more unstable the political community.

This survey of canonical texts insists, contrary to those holding inequality to be benign today, that great wealth disparities cannot be dismissed. These concerns have been expressed from the very birth of Western political philosophy itself and can be found in its most venerated texts. These are not ancillary to the Western tradition—they represent much of that tradition’s core. Further, these worries cannot be reduced to any single school of thought. They inform most of the major traditions of political thought from antiquity through the nineteenth century. Complaints about inequality cannot simply be dismissed as the unique concern of one branch of political philosophy.³⁵ The consensus found among these various schools and approaches suggests that inequality must be taken seriously, especially in the face of recent trends. Finally, the attention paid in these texts to wealth concentration and inequality, in addition to poverty, suggests that if “the canon” has anything to teach us about these matters, it is that although housing and feeding the poor is certainly important, this may not be an adequate policy response. To the degree that inequality stokes social and political divisions, inequality itself demands careful monitoring—or at least this is what significant voices from the Western tradition suggest. To the extent that we still take these texts seriously in the twenty-first century, we should hear them out.

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