

What is wrong with inequality?

Michael Steinmann¹

The Maintainers II. Labor, Technology, and Social Orders.
Conference at Stevens Institute of Technology, April 6 – 9, 2017

1.

Searching leisurely through the internet in preparation for this conference on “maintainers,” I came across the following quote. It is taken from a paper on “The True Cost of Maintenance”:²

When most managers in reactive maintenance environments are asked to state the first word that comes into their minds when they hear the word maintenance, the most common response is cost. This is an indicator of the lack of control that management has over maintenance budgets in these environments. The traditional approach of management to resolve this problem is to cut the maintenance budget or reduce the headcount in an attempt to control the budget.

“Cost,” or the interest in reducing cost, is also the first thing that came to my mind in thinking about maintenance work. It is hard not to see this type of work in light of the growing inequality in wages and living conditions that is the focus of so many current debates.³ As a philosopher, I am also less attuned to the detailed description of practices and technical systems that seemingly fascinate most of the participants at the “Maintainers” conference. What I sense in the interest for maintainers is ultimately a moral concern, the normative question of how we should think of maintenance work and how the workers should be treated. Maintainers, I believe, are philosophically relevant because they call for us to articulate the injustices that pervade their lives. At the same time, it seems to me that maintenance work can be a way to think about work in general and how its conditions are essential for any approach to justice.

I will approach the problem of justice here through the issue of inequality. This issue is more elusive than it might seem. After all, nothing in principle is wrong with inequality.⁴ Not only are *not* all forms of inequality morally problematic, one can even show how beneficial inequalities are in stimulating competitiveness and innovation. After all, a free-market society is driven by the interest in becoming richer. Why then are supposed to care about rising inequality, especially the inequality that comes from the pressure of reducing the cost of maintenance work?

¹ Stevens Institute of Technology, email: msteinma@stevens.edu

² See the website of the company LFE Life Cycle Engineering: <https://www.lce.com/The-True-Cost-of-Maintenance-1110.html>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/06/business/economy/a-bigger-economic-pie-but-a-smaller-slice-for-half-of-the-us.html>

⁴ Harry Frankfurt: *On Inequality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015, where this issue is rather tediously pointed out.

If one asks this question – why do we care about inequality? – one sees that there are many bad reasons to care. I will lay out some of the bad reasons to care in the first part of this talk, while the second one will what good reasons there are.

First, isn't the concern for maintainers and maintenance work the symptom of a rather nostalgic attitude towards the past? A past in which real work done by real people was still appreciated, and one didn't need to spend all one's energy and income on getting a college degree? What drives historians to look at conditions of work if not the old-fashioned idea of the "worker," who with his hands and heart pursues an honest occupation and deals with real, that is, necessary and beneficial things? After all, the idea that some folks are "working hard" is deeply engrained in the American imagination as a sign of dignity and desert. In that sense, isn't the maintainers' conference simply a playground for those who like old technology, a little bit like a gathering of people who drive old cars and spend hours looking at them? Why talk about maintainers at the time when their very jobs are in danger of vanishing and the dynamics of capitalism tend to outsource or at least diminish their work? Efforts might be better spent on analyzing the current form of capitalism in all its destructive tendencies.

At the end, nostalgia is not only ineffective, it can also easily be abused. Nothing shows this better, perhaps, than President Trump being surrounded by coal miners while signing an executive order meant to repeal environmental restrictions.⁵ Real miners, like real maintainers, so become the symbol for the authenticity and honesty of the president's politics. While "the environment" is an abstract entity, supported by people with college degrees who have no idea about the real world, the concern for miners is immediate, tangible and full of human empathy. Obviously, one has to concede that all American politicians love maintainers, the "hard working people," democrats included. Trump just employs such tactics more shamelessly than others. Still, the case in point here shows that nostalgia can easily prevent us from engaging in the difficult analytical work that would be necessary to understand the systemic conditions of our current world. By trying to appreciate maintainers we miss what threatens their very existence.

This brings me to the second point, which is closely related to the one just mentioned. By looking at maintainers as a historical phenomenon, academics just accomplish what capitalism has already started to do: make maintainers a thing of past. Once management has done its job and reduced maintenance work to its bare minimum, historians come in and look at what has gone. Historians and managers thereby share that both are *not* what they are concerned with: maintainers. Historians, after all, are elitists, people who have worked for doctoral degrees that allow them to work in admirable conditions at institutions of higher learning. Historians, like other academics, want to be as solidly middle class as any middle manager wants and complain if their income sinks to the level of maintainers. Academics, in other words, and even the ones organizing a conference like "The Maintainners," are part of the bourgeoisie. The ultimate sign of a bourgeois attitude is that one pretends to care about the under-privileged. Members of the academic middle class often feel that their work might indeed be as parasitic as maintainers think it is, and the only way to acknowledge this is to openly feel bad and display one's conscience. But again, instead of focusing on the neglected other, the maintainers, shouldn't academics focus much rather on the systemic conditions of work that they themselves have helped to create? For example, focus on conditions

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/28/climate/trump-executive-order-climate-change.html>

of education and learning that actually contribute to the rise of inequality, or on the ever-increasing computerization of life, created by academics, that makes human work a thing of the past?

These remarks should not be seen as personal polemic. As said before, there are bad reasons to be concerned with inequality, and I just want to list some of them. We academics – everyone included: speaker, organizers, audience – have to be aware how often we are concerned with inequality for such bad reasons.

A third point shall only be mentioned briefly. Would maintainers like to attend a “Maintainer’s” conference? Do they share concerns about inequalities, after all? The recent presidential election has shown that the lower classes in society are as much involved in the fierce struggle against those below than the upper ones are. It has been noted how the working class is critical against welfare and entitlement programs and in the last presidential elections voted precisely for those who would rather eliminate them.⁶ Maintainers like to work, but they do not always like to maintain others who are unable to do so. Most probably maintainers do not like to call themselves maintainers but rather want to be as important, productive and innovative as anyone else. This means that a conference like “The Maintainers” most likely misses the class struggles that are going on and take the side of groups who do not even think to need their help.

My fourth and last point has to be brief as well, although it deserves much more attention. How can we care about inequality without getting entangled in the dialectics of envy and resentment? Isn’t there a temptation to praise the maintainers because the innovators are bad, simply because they care about business alone and are rich? In other words, isn’t there a risk that one is concerned about inequality only because one envies the rich?⁷ Obviously, there are good reasons not to like the rich if one isn’t part of their class. But the question is how such resentment furthers the concern for inequality. In a sense, in targeting the rich one makes the same categorical mistake one makes in focusing on maintainers. One looks at persons, or groups of persons, instead of the systemic conditions of modern capitalism. For example, one can easily call for a higher taxation of the rich because of their growing capital incomes without ever addressing the problem of how such enormous incomes are created in the first place. For the latter, one needs an economic theory combined with normative principles, which is much more difficult to develop than an attitude towards specific people.

2.

If these are just a few bad reasons for why we care about inequality, what are good reasons? The answer given here is philosophical and by no means meant as the only possible one. But it might not be clear what a philosophical answer is. It is best to contrast it to a political one. From a political point of view, all ideas are valid that can be successfully adopted and implemented. If a party or politician wants to promote the idea that our society should be fairer, they simply do so and can use the idea to change existing

⁶ https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/07/business/economy/trump-budget-entitlements-working-class.html?_r=0

⁷ John Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* has in fact two chapters on envy as psychological condition that undermines the interest in justice. Justice, in turn, is meant to make envy superfluous: “It would seem that a well-ordered society as much as any other offers constructive alternatives to hostile outbreaks of envy” (John Rawls: *A Theory of Justice. Revised Edition*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).

practices. Political ideas are performative insofar as they create the reality that is envisioned in them. Political ideas are justified if enough people feel persuaded by them. From a philosophical point of view, instead, no idea is justified unless there are good reasons for it to be accepted; reasons which then need to be shared by everyone, or at least potentially everyone.

This difference – which would need more explanation than is given here – comes to bear precisely with respect to justice. Philosophically speaking, claims for a more just society have to be rooted in the very idea of a society, in the way individuals live together and share a common world. They cannot be imposed by just one part of society who happens to have an interest in them. If that happens, if the idea of justice is at the service of one particular group, other groups have no reason to adopt it. The idea then rightfully does not concern them.

Some philosophers have tried to show why every citizen inherently cares about inequalities that put parts of the population at a disadvantage, that is, why everyone cares if only their rational assumptions were examined in an impartial way. As already said, arguments of this kind aim at the structure of society as a whole. The most prominent example is Rawls' theory of justice with its contra-factual assumption of an impartial point of view on the distribution of goods and rights.⁸ Against Rawls, Sandel, like others before, has recently claimed that the focus on individual opportunity leads to underestimating conditions that are independent of choice, such as the common life that citizens lead in a functioning democracy.⁹

I believe that the focus on maintenance work can further enrich these attempts at articulating the inherent interest in a just society. The need for maintenance, I would argue, points at the common life that individuals have, especially with respect to the inter-connectedness and inter-dependence of working conditions in the age of technological capitalism, where whatever is maintained is maintained for others. Individuals can fulfill their vital needs only within a system that is determined by highly complex technological structures. The division of labor that separates managers and maintainers is at the same time the condition that binds them together, because in a structure of divided labor no particular work is valid on its own.

⁸ See, for example, the “reasoning leading to the two principles of justice”: “Now consider the point of view of anyone in the original position. There is no way for him to win special advantages for himself. Nor, on the other hand, are there grounds for his acquiescing in special disadvantages. Since it is not reasonable for him to expect more than an equal share in the division of social primary goods, and since it is not rational for him to agree to less, the sensible thing is to acknowledge as the first step a principle of justice requiring an equal distribution. Indeed, this principle is so obvious given the symmetry of the parties that it would occur to everyone immediately. Thus the parties start with a principle requiring equal basic liberties for all, as well as fair equality of opportunity and equal division of income and wealth. [...] If there are inequalities in income and wealth, and differences in authority and degrees of responsibility, that work to make everyone better off in comparison with the benchmark of equality, why not permit them? [...] Thus the basic structure should allow these inequalities so long as these improve everyone's situation, including that of the least advantaged, provided that they are consistent with equal liberty and fair opportunity. Because the parties start from an equal division of all social primary goods, those who benefit least have, so to speak, a veto” (Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 130-1).

⁹ Michael Sandel: “What Money Can't Buy. The Moral Limits of Markets.” Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Oxford 1998, 120-22 (<http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/documents/a-to-z/s/sandel00.pdf>). See his remark: “From the standpoint of the republican conception of citizenship, the danger is this: The new inequality does not simply prevent the poor from sharing in the fruits of consumption and choosing their ends for themselves; it also leads rich and poor to live increasingly separate ways of life” (120).

These remarks are obviously very broad and would need more work to be justified. It is best to turn them into a question. This question would be whether it is possible to derive binding philosophical arguments against inequality from the idea of the commonly shared life of a technology-dominated world. In such a world as ours, do we have rational interests in developing a just society?¹⁰

An important step in finding answers to this question can lie, I believe, in taking maintenance work not only as a particular form of but as the basic paradigm of work. This point is again best articulated as a question: are we theoretically allowed to take the idea of maintenance to explain the idea of work in general, to explain what work in its most basic form means? There are probably more arguments needed to show that this is so. But it seems hard not to think of work as an effort to fulfill one's vital needs, and the fulfillment of vital needs *is* maintenance work. Even if humans do many things that go beyond the mere need to maintain themselves alive, in everything they do they also have to maintain the conditions that allow them to do so (or they need others to maintain these conditions for them). And again, all fulfillment of vital needs also happens in the highly inter-dependent and connected way that is typical for maintenance work.

The productive work that drives capitalism, instead, falls under a different category. Things are produced – manufactured or invented – in order to be sold, and they are sold in order to generate capital. Their production doesn't have to be continuous and doesn't have to be maintained because once the capital is generated, it becomes productive on its own, leaving behind the conditions under which it was produced. One could perhaps argue that capital growth and capital productivity is not work, that it only uses human work as its fuel without necessarily contributing to its maintenance.¹¹

Seen from this angle, the distinction between innovation and maintenance that drives this conference, may really be the difference, or better: the antagonism between capitalism and work. We might even call it the antagonism between capitalism and life. Principles of justice, it seems, cannot be derived from capitalism but only from the commonly shared life that underlies it. This way, the focus on maintenance can indeed lead us to an articulation of our most important moral concerns.

¹⁰ From what has been said here, one could tentatively form two arguments, one negative, or prohibitive (“don’t”), the other one positive (“do”). The first one goes as follows: some individuals are more vulnerable than others to pressures resulting from the system of work, and some might even be vulnerable through their own lack of effort, but all can only fulfill their needs if the system on which they depend works as a whole (e.g., the electric grid). Seen from an impartial point of view, one could then say that we are morally not allowed to fulfill our needs if others can't who share both the same needs and the conditions of its fulfillment. For example, if everyone needs clean water, and clean water can be provided by technical means, but no individual can provide for it all by herself, then one cannot provide clean water only for some. Limitations can only be justified by temporary practical constraints. This argument gets even stronger if we say that some fulfill their needs *only because* others are not allowed to do so, for example when repairs to a system depend on local differences in property tax. The second argument would state that everyone is better off if all members of society can fulfill their needs, assuming that because of the given inter-dependence better overall systems make all individuals' lives better. This argument is less stringent than the previous one, because obviously the lives of certain groups can be greatly improved by depreciating the lives of others. The argument hinges on the assumption that one refers to advantages for society as a whole, not for groups. But the assumption that society as a whole should be just, or that justice concerns society as a whole, is the basic assumption that needs to be made in order to get any argument concerning justice off the ground. It is a historical assumption, based on the achievements of modernity, that underlies all rational arguments that can be made.

¹¹ One can think of Arendt's distinction of “labor” and “work” in this regard, whereby “work” is a rather misleading translation of the German “herstellen,” which means “making” or “producing.” See Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. (Although the book was first published in English, Arendt's own translation into German shows that “making” or “producing” are conceptually more adequate.)