The Challenge of Inequity: How to Negotiate a World of "Haves" and "Have-Nots"

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The world will always be one of "haves" and "have nots." Whether the measurement is wealth, power, health, honor, education, attentive parenting, nourishing food, clean water, physical ability, artistic ability, brain power, intimacy, friendships, tribal association, or even sheer luck, there will always be those who are in a "better" position than others.

For much of human history, this sort of inequity was taken as a given—a fact of life that is true of all animate nature. However, as reflection on the human condition became more prominent, arguments that some forms of inequity can be ameliorated began to emerge—with Marxism, perhaps, being the most notable.

While the radical equality anticipated by early Marxists never found solid footing, nonetheless, many people have embraced the belief that attempting to alleviate inequality is a worthy goal. This is the topic of the present paper. We will begin by noting that "inequity aversion" is a built-in human trait, something we share with our primate cousins. We will then reflect on the fact that, nonetheless, throughout human history, inequity has typically been the norm: that societies have lived for centuries on the backbone of class and caste systems, and that even Plato insisted that inequality would inevitably be part of a just society.

Though many now reject the kind of human categorization that may, ironically, have contributed to making inequity tolerable, it will be noted that articulating how best to move toward a less unequal social arrangement remains difficult due to the ambiguity generated by the uneasy tension between the concepts of equity and equality, combined with the vagaries of human nature.

In spite of the difficulties inherent to the challenge of making progress toward a less unequal world, it will be argued that progress is nonetheless possible, particularly if those bent on such movement adopt the following five rules of thumb.

1. Pick your battles.
2. Articulate a precise doable vision.
3. Speak to the collective imagination.
4. Avoid virtue signalling, while embracing costly ones.
5. Get comfortable with tragic optimism.

We will close by focusing on the need for educators to help shape the lenses of the next generation so that, when they view the enormity not only of the number of problems that humans face, but also the scope of each one, they are not overwhelmed either with anger or pessimism; instead, are able to adopt the rules of thumb suggested herein, and so focus on the tedious work of continuing to change the rotten planks of our barely seaworthy vessel that we so desperately need to sail through the ocean of never-ending challenges that make up the plight of humankind (Anderson and Gardner, 2019, p. 232).

Inequity in the Animal Kingdom

In a 2003 experiment, Brosnan and de Waal showed that capuchin monkeys showed what they referred to as "inequity aversion" when they rejected a less-preferred reward when they saw a partner monkey get a better reward for the same task. And in a 2010 experiment, Brosnan *et al.* showed that chimpanzees (who tend to be more individually competitive than Capuchins) were happy to receive a low-value carrot when the test mate also got a carrot, but refused the carrot when the test-mate got a high-value grape. However, when both individuals received a carrot after first being shown a grape, they were significantly more likely to refuse the carrot than in cases where no expectation of a better reward had been presented. What these results suggest is that primates have an expectation of fairness and will protest in cases where this expectation is not met, both in cases where rewards were handed out unequally and when a prior assumed agreement was not honored.

Eric Johnson (2010) suggests that there is an evolutionary explanation for the presence of inequity aversion in social animals, namely that "those communities which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best and rear the greatest number of offspring," i.e., they would be more 'fit' than those societies where members only cared about themselves.

Inequity in Class and Caste Systems

For centuries, most human groups have organized themselves in class and/or caste systems. This is hardly surprising given the need to create a division of labor to maximize the group's productive and protective capacity. Thus Plato, in T*he Republic* (Cornford, 1945), argued that a just society is one that consists of three distinct groups: the rulers, the warriors, and the producers, while the feudal system, which lasted in Europe from the 9th to the 15th century,[1] consisted of four levels: the Monarch, Nobles, Knights, and Peasants. Even some religions, such as Hinduism, categorized humans into different categories with the top slot occupied by the priests, and then in descending order, the warriors, the merchants, the peasants, and finally the untouchables or the Dalits.

According to Plato, such an organization makes sense since each human has certain natural abilities (370a) and doing only the single job for which one is naturally suited is the most efficient way to satisfy the needs of all the citizens (370c). These divisions are further solidified in Plato's *Republic* by

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feudalism

different educational forms and intensities, while differences in natural ability continually widened by ensuring that mating occurred between similar individuals (458d-459d).

Though he clearly thought this set up was ideal, Plato expressed some reservation as to how to bring about this exemplary society. At one point he suggests that the easiest way might be to expel everyone over the age of ten out of an existing city and start from scratch (540e-541b).

What is of note in *The Republic* is Plato's dismal assessment of the most obvious alternative way of organizing human society, namely democracy. According to Plato, the primary goal of a democracy is freedom or license (557b-c) which results in citizens pursuing all sorts of desires excessively (558d-559d) without any shame or self-discipline (560d), and that this avarice feeds on itself and becomes a kind of slavery (563e-564a). This, in turn, creates resentment between those who have more than others which then creates fertile ground for the emergence of a tyrant who presents himself as a champion of the people against the class of the few people who are wealthy (565d-566a), but who is a false prophet who must then eliminate anyone who might be a threat to his power (567c)—all of which seems preternaturally prescient given the contemporary state of modern democracies.

Of course, most modern democratic citizens are just as condemnatory of Plato's "just" society as he was of ours, though the obvious "naturalness" of this disgust toward "unjust" class and caste systems is such that it tends to mask the obvious question percolating beneath the surface: why were such stratified societies so successful for so many centuries?

Why Were Stratified Societies So Successful for So Many Centuries?

The most obvious answer as to why stratified societies were so successful for so many centuries seems to be that it is precisely the clumping of humans into relatively rigid categories, or reference groups, that makes inequity tolerable: it ensures that the same *category* of people are treated in the same way, i.e., equally, while unequal treatment of people in different categories does not obviously register as unfair.

Interestingly, this suggestion, that equity comparisons tend to be confined to one's reference group, is supported by contemporary research. Garcia-Castro et al. (2022), in their study of 34,387 subjects from 22 countries[2], found that Perceived Economic Inequality (PEI) is *not* related to objective inequality—an outcome that was demonstrated in other research (Evans & Kelly, 2018; Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018; Schmalor & Heine, 2021). These studies found that individuals are generally not as interested in a broad spectrum of income disparities, but rather in the differences found in their reference groups (Knell & Stix, 2020); that people tend to ignore the income of individuals at the top of the hierarchy (Easterbrook, 2021), which authors argue supports the suggestion that people believe that wealthy individuals' capital is deserved (Walker et al., 2021).

[2] The countries were: Switzerland, Chile, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Croatia, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Philippines, Russia, Slovenia, Thailand, South Africa, Bulgaria, Great Britain, Iceland, Israel, Lithuania, Suriname, Taiwan.

Since an increase in perception of economic inequality (PEI) was not higher in countries that have a higher inequality index, Garcia-Castro et al. (2022) speculate that since country-level inequality is often related to spatial segregation, more unequal societies that limit the social interactions between people from different socioeconomic backgrounds stabilize the status quo by reducing people's awareness of inequality (Mijs & Roe, 2021; Evans & Kelley, 2018).

The fact that PEI tends to be confined to one's reference group supports the counterintuitive argument that the more progress a society makes toward reducing inequality, i.e., reducing strict stratification, the greater the resentment toward those who "have" by those who "have not," something supported by Hoffer (1951) who says "the intensity of discontent seems to be in inverse proportion to the distance from the object fervently desired" (p. 29); and that "it is not actual suffering but the taste of better things that excites people to revolt" (p. 29); that "discontent is likely highest. . . when conditions have so improved that an ideal state seems almost within reach;" and that "a grievance is most poignant when almost redressed" (p. 28).

All of which explains why, though we live in a world with less concentration of power and property than the world has ever seen (Piketty, 2022, p. 30[3]), fury over the continuing inequality continues to escalate.

Equality or Equity: What is The Vision?

If the goal is to continue progress toward a less unequal society, we need to try to make some sense of the tricky concepts of equality and equity. Treating people *equally* is generally taken to mean that we treat people the *same*, which, on the face of it, seems only fair. Only a mean-spirited mother (let's call her Mrs. Smith) would give one child two cookies, but the other child only one. On the other hand, if one child has a severe learning disability, it also seems only fair to give that child two hours of homework assistance per night but only one hour for the other.

Treating people unequally in an effort to create more *equal outcomes* is what *equity* is all about. Our mother, who gives more assistance to a child who has a learning disability than to one who doesn't, is treating them *unequally* but striving for *equity* in the hope that both children have an equal shot at having a good life.

On the face of it, striving for *equal outcomes* seems to be the more laudable vision. Indeed, this was the romantic communist utopian ideal that took the world by storm in the early 20th century. If we can create equal outcomes so that we all have the same amount to eat and live in similar dwellings, surely, we would thereby create an environment in which we could live in brotherly love without the sort of jealousy and resentment endemic to a more unequal arrangement.

The slogan "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs," popularized by Marx, captures the vision of equity perfectly until, of course, one notices the deep ambiguity built into both phrases. Billy, for instance, may estimate that doing 10 hours/day of heavy work 6 days/week is

[3] In the whole of France, the richest 1 percent's share fell from 55% in 1914 to less than 20% at the beginning of the 1980's (Piketty, 2022, p. 30).

well within his ability, while Jack assumes that "all work and no play makes Jack a very dull boy" and so can't imagine doing more than 5 hours of light work/day for 4 days max. As well, Billy is satisfied with 3 square meals/day and a sturdy roof over his head, while Jack thinks it is obvious that humans need sufficient resources to enjoy their downtime.

Striving for equity, in other words, is neither simple nor inevitably fair: why should Billy work like stink while Jack enjoys a more leisurely life? Also, equity is, in principle, incompatible with liberty, to say nothing of the fact that even with a tyrannical hand, outcomes are rarely equal, as is evidenced by the fact that China, an authoritarian quasi-communist county, has more billionaires than most others,[4] with Russia[5] not far behind.

So, equity and equality seem to have us between a rock and a hard place: on the one hand, equity points to an illiberal path toward tainted outcomes, while, on the other hand, equal treatment of those who face vastly different challenges also seems untenable.

At first, it may seem that a potential answer can be found in our parent, Mrs. Smith. The fact that Mrs. Smith is adamant about equal cookies, but unequal homework assistance, seems to be anchored in the dual assumptions that equal treatment that results in short-term equity is important, but that since ultimately each of us is responsible for the outcome of his or her life, unequal treatment may be justified if the goal is to try and ensure that we all begin life with the same bounce off the springboard.

Again, though, we run headlong into reality. Suggesting that we try to ensure that all young humans start at the same start line smacks once more of utopianism, unless, as was suggested in Plato's *Republic*, we require that the state raise all children from birth. However, in a world where the nuclear family is the norm, we have no choice but to accept that a child born to uneducated drug-addicted parents living in a slum is never going to have the same shot at a good life as a child raised by kind, well educated, financially secure parents in a leafy middle-class neighbourhood, no matter what anyone does (though the starkness of these differences can be at least somewhat mitigated by a strong social safety net[6]).

This then, is one of the central messages of the present paper, namely, that utopian visions, though they provide an emotionally inspiring focus, are not only fantastically unobtainable (in Gopnick's words (2019, p. 14) they are "unicorns"), but due to their messianic energy, tend to create a vicious intolerance of those who are not so inspired, thus silencing suggestions that might otherwise create workable solutions.

[4] https://ceoworld.biz/2023/03/23/countries-with-the-most-billionaires-2023/#:~:text=According%20to%20data%20from%20the,and%20India%2C%20with%20187%20billionaires.
[5] https://www.statista.com/statistics/299513/billionaires-top-countries/
[6] On the 2020 World Economic Forum's Global Social Mobility Index that measures the intergenerational social mobility in 82 different countries, the Scandinavian countries came out on top, with Canada, that has a fairly thick safety net coming in at 14th, the US at 27th, Russia at 39th, China at 45th, Mexico at 58th, India at 76th, and the Ivory Coast at dead last. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Social_Mobility_Index

As an alternative, we suggest that those who hope for a better world, whom we will henceforth refer to as "Movers,"[7] can do so only on the understanding that, like the concepts of equality and equity, *neither the left nor the right* has a monopoly on sketching the best route ahead; but that, with a realistic appraisal both of the complexity of challenges and the inevitable precarity of any suggested solution, with their rhinoceros head lowered and a lumbering pace forward (Gopnick, 2019), they can make steady progress.

Specifically, we suggest that Movers understand at a deep level that inequality is a "wicked problem" (Bentley & Toth, 2020) that will require multiple players with different visions, working together toward a more equitable world. Second, we suggest, precisely because of the precarity of the road ahead, that we follow the lead of Adam Gopnik, in his book *A Thousand Small Sanities* (2019), when he argues that, because of the complexity to the challenges we face, incremental cautious reform is likely to get more things right than any other kind (p. 26); that though we don't know what is good, we can know what is bad, (p. 32); and that fixing what is clearly imperfect, if we can, should be sufficient, even if we have no idea whatever what perfect might look like (p. 33).

And this, interestingly, is an accurate description of the road taken by Mrs. Smith. She has no idea what a good life looks like for her children, but she knows that a learning disability can be a huge impediment to maximizing her child's potential, and she knows that she has the ability to potentially ameliorate its long-term negative influence. She is, in other words, being a strong parental safety net. [8]

"Rules of Thumb" for "Movers"

The implication of the common saying that "the road to hell is paved with good intentions," is that good intentions are not enough. Deep thought and foresight are needed not only to contribute to making the world a better place, but also to avoid the law of unintended, often horrific, consequences. The following rules of thumb are offered as important signposts for forward movement.

1. Pick your battles.
2. Articulate a precise doable vision.
3. Speak to the collective imagination.
4. Avoid virtue signalling, while embracing costly ones.
5. Get comfortable with tragic optimism.

[7] It is suggested that those who focus on doing the work, rather than merely advertising their commitment, call themselves "movers" rather than "progressives" as the latter term has already been highjacked by the "advertisers."

[8] It is of interest to note that though social mobility (something that is afforded by a strong social safety net) is the conceptual opposite of a stringently stratified society, they appear to have a similar impact of lowering "perceived economic inequality" (PEI) of the inflammatory type. In a society with high social mobility, there is little point in inflammatory protest, since one can usually make progress under one's own steam, and in a stringently stratified society, inflammatory protest is also of little point since, since joining the ranks of royalty is clearly a non-starter. Thus, to the degree that this is true, one would predict an uptick of inflammatory protest in the United States which, on the one hand, does not have a strong social safety net, and which, in the last four decades, has gone from being one of the best societies to guarantee equality of opportunity and social mobility to being the worst among the G7 nations (Stiglitz, 2012).

We will deal with each of these in turn.

Pick Your Battles

If your goal is to leave this world better than when you arrived, the potential paths for you to take are innumerable. It is crucial, though, that you accept that neither you, nor anyone else, can be a hero in all domains. If you are focusing on the climate crisis or even how to save the marmot[9], you won't have the resources to devote much energy to ameliorating inequity. But you are ripe for being victimized by Social Justice Warriors for not exhibiting devotion to their cause. You will need a thick skin. Remember Greta Thunberg apparently did not feel guilty about not marching for economic inequity, for not supporting the Black Lives Matter Movement, or even for not pushing hard for better treatment of autism (though that, apparently is an affliction from which she suffers). She picked her battle and was prepared to send the costly signal of crossing the Atlantic Ocean with a crew in a small boat to testify to her commitment.

The moral of this part of the story is that, with regard to making the world a better place, we all benefit from a division of labor. For that reason, if any of us is doing our best at doing one thing well, we ought, on the one hand, not to feel guilty for not trying to put a finger in every hole in the dyke, nor should we worry about being shamed by others for not tending to other perhaps equally worthy causes.

Articulate a Precise Doable Vision

A vision, or in Behaviorist terms, "a stimulus" elicits a response. If the stimulus is not sufficiently clear and precise, it will either elicit no response at all, or one that is ineffective, or, worse, one that makes the situation even less palatable. As Gardner notes in her critical thinking text (2009)

> If you let yourself get away with being vague, you are allowing yourself to skip along the surface of the issue. You are merely paying lip service to the problem at hand while ensuring that your thinking does not contribute to the solution. You are whining about a serious issue while leaving the hard work up to others. Life is too serious for any of us to put up with impotent complaining. We need to either accept the imperfections of life or figure out ways in which it can be improved. Precise thinking is necessary for the latter. (p. 59)

In contradistinction to this viewpoint are the many "anti-this" and "anti-that" movements that go by such names as anti-globalism, anti-racism, anti-work,[10] anti-war, anti-Americanism[11], anti-science[12], anti-consumerism[13], anti-hate[14], anti-narcissism,[15] anti-rape[16], anti-capitalism, and so on.

[9] The Marmot lives on Vancouver Island and is the only mammal species endemic to the province of British Columbia, Canada, but is going extinct.
[10] https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20220126-the-rise-of-the-anti-work-movement
[11] https://politics.utoronto.ca/publication/slow-anti-americanism-social-movements-and-symbolic-politics-in-central-asia/
[12] https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-antiscience-movement-is-escalating-going-global-and-killing-thousands/
[13] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-consumerism

There was even a Health Canada report that suggested that "public officials openly advocate for the toppling of capitalism, Western society, and even the very concept of 'liberty and individualism'" (Hopper, 2023, p. NP4) on the grounds that health issues associated with this means of production, particularly climate change, would thereby be improved.

Such movements are seductive because they suggest that joining such organizations contributes to making the world a better place. Who wouldn't want to do their bit in getting rid of racism, war, hatred, out-of-control consumerism and narcissism, rape, and the worst vagaries of capitalism? The difficulty is, of course, that being against anything does not contribute in any way to mitigating the worst harms of the behavior that one is against. Life is always about choices: if not that, then what? And it is articulating the "then what?" that is the hard part.

Churchill famously said, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others."[17] This quote suggests that whining about what is wrong is deeply unhelpful unless a better alternative is suggested.

And this is the moral of this part of the story, i.e., that in order to make the world a better place, the critical first step is the articulation of a precise doable action-plan; one that has sufficient clarification that it doesn't need you to constantly reinterpret.

Speak to the Collective Imagination

According to Charles Taylor (2004), practices gain or lose popularity (or moral status) depending on the cultural context, and the right narrative-triggers within the right context can lead to fundamental social shifts or mutations, or "ruptures" in the collective imagination—what Taylor refers to as "the social imaginary," that then help to establish conditions in which members of civil society can conceptualize acting in different ways and so follow different norms in specific contexts (Taylor, 2004, pg. 8-9).

It is important to note here that Taylor is trying to make the case that mutations and changes in the social imaginary and moral order are rarely caused by an overarching law or order which mandates a practice but, rather, the other way around.

The difference between top-to-bottom and bottom-to-top change strategies is interestingly exemplified in evolving changes to the practice of the death penalty in America. In 1972, the Supreme Court attempted to do away with the use of the death penalty in America (Giridharadas, 2021) by instituting a top-down approach that, rather than creating a change in the practice, caused reactionary narratives from proponents of the death penalty, e.g., a slight to state honour and independence. By contrast, civil society groups slowly chipped away at the legitimacy and moral basis of the practice by

[14] https://www.coe.int/en/web/no-hate-campaign
[15] https://www.quora.com/What-is-anti-narcissism
[16] https://resourcesharingproject.org/resources/a-brief-history-of-the-anti-rape-movement/
[17] https://richardlangworth.com/worst-form-of-government

drawing attention to key ethical issues (minors, mental health, racial discrimination), which spoke to narratives in the social imaginary that framed society as a defender of human rights and equality. Through powerful images, stories, and narratives, they provided a commentary on the practice, which challenged the established social imaginary and wove a new imaginary overtop.

K.A. Appiah (2011) similarly notes that, throughout history, significant societal changes to certain practices, such as the elimination of slavery, dueling in England, and Chinese foot-binding—practices that were, at one point, fundamental social norms, were changed due to shifts in civil society narratives (Taylor's Social Imaginary) regarding what was considered honorable and just (p. 114).

All of which suggests that if we desire to bring about social change, the challenge is to influence the collective imagination which requires, on the one hand, that we be able to articulate what that change would look like and why it is a positive change, and, on the other, to then engage in genuine dialogue with others who may have different and even more imaginative suggestions as to how to go forward.

Of one thing we can be sure of, though, and that is that we rarely succeed in influencing and changing the collective imagination if we set up war camps and demonize those with different viewpoints. To have an effective and lasting impact, we must have an understanding of our own motivations, but also the motivations and understandings of those who share our world.

Beware of Cheap Signalling, though Embrace Costly Ones.

You've heard it. Those #! @*&% crooks on Wall Street. Those #! @*&% corporations that are ruining the environment. Those #! @*&% companies that are creating jobs everywhere but in their own home country. This economic inequity is intolerable. We should not have to accept this.
No! No! No!

Along with spontaneous expressions of outrage, citizens express their disgust with economic inequality on social media with distinct patterns of "likes," which may very well be accompanied by wearing t-shirts in support of local movements. Some or much of this can be classified as "virtue signalling," a term coined by British journalist James Bartholomew in a 2015 article aptly titled "Easy Virtue: Want to be virtuous? Saying the right things on Twitter is much easier than real kindness." Of virtue signalling, he says, "It's noticeable how often virtue signalling consists of saying you hate things. It is camouflage. The emphasis on hate distracts from the fact you are really saying how good you are." And he goes on to say, "If you were frank and said, 'I care about the environment more than most people do' or 'I care about the poor more than others', your vanity and self-aggrandizement would be obvious, . . . *Anger and outrage disguise your boastfulness*" (emphasis added).

According to Bartholomew, the problem is that "No one actually has to do anything. Virtue comes from mere words or even from silently held beliefs." In the jargon of economics, this sort of

assertion of moral superiority is a 'positional good' — a way of differentiating yourself from others. It has also been termed slacktivism.[18]

When this sort of virtue signalling becomes commonplace, i.e., when large numbers of people are sending signals primarily to try to convince others that they are better than average, the result is often what signalling theorists call a 'runaway': an arms race toward more and more extreme signals which can lead people to hold beliefs that are increasingly disconnected from reality (Quillian, 2021).

When this happens, we suggest that a case can be made that, aside from being annoying, virtue signalling is actually harmful because a lot of loud screaming about commitment to equity creates a *fake ecosystem* of furious concern that may seduce others to try and grab the microphone, but "invisiblizes" the tedious unsexy work that individuals are actually doing in the trenches, thus discouraging others from joining the real work.

This is not to say, however, that all signalling is negative. Indeed, quite the contrary if the signal is costly. Tadeg Quillian, an evolutionary psychologist, notes that biologists and economists have struggled for some time to try and figure out why costly signalling is so prevalent and seemingly important (2021). Why, for instance, are peahens so attracted by the peacocks with extravagant tails—which are very costly to maintain but otherwise seemingly useless? Why do employers care that you put yourself hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt to get an Ivy League degree in sociology with no obvious relevance to the job?

Quillian notes that since all individuals have incentives to lie, signal receivers focus on signals that are difficult to fake: university degrees for employers, and extravagant tails that virtually guarantee the health of the mate. Indeed, experiments have shown that most of us categorize people on the basis of the costs they are willing to bear to benefit their group, rather than on the basis of the amount of benefit they actually provide, e.g., a poor person donating $5 to charity would tend to get more positive kudos than a rich person who donated $200.

The central message, according to Quillin, is that evolution has demanded that we learn to discriminate signals that indicate "honest" and those that suggest "deceiver," and one way we do that is by estimating the cost of the signal.

Learning How to Be Tragically Optimistic

Structural inequity is a "wicked problem" (Bentley &Toth, 2020): it has innumerable causes, is tough to describe, and does not have one right answer because effective action requires support of multiple stakeholders with widely differing perspectives (p. 10). Unlike non-wicked problems that can be solved, wicked problems can only be "worked at" (p. 21). Or, as Bentley & Toth put it, "Solving is for tame problems. Taming is for wicked ones" (p. 53); Or as Steve Rayner's says (2014): Wicked problems are chronic conditions that can be managed only more or less well[19] (p. 112).

[18] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slacktivism

[19] Think of "harm reduction" programs that have been instituted to help ameliorate the damages from drug addiction. People who work in drug addiction know that the problem of drug addiction will not be "solved."

For this reason, the wickedness of inequity can be paralyzing because, as English philosopher Michael Oakeshott put it: "to try and do something which is inherently impossible is always a corrupting experience;"[20] or as psychologists Seligman & Maier might put it, trying to tackle a wicked problem can result in "learned helplessness" (1967): since nothing that I do results in any appreciable difference, what is the point of doing anything? What is of interest with regard to the notion of "learned helplessness" is that since much of our lives are lived in our imagination, if the scope and depth of the problem is such that it overwhelms our vision, it is not inconceivable that helplessness can be learned in the imagination.

On the other hand, though helplessness can be learned, so indeed can optimism—something that has gained empirical support in studies in psychology (Seligman, 1990), but also, in the more philosophical writings of Viktor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist who spent three years in Nazi concentration camps and who lost his mother, brother and wife to the Holocaust. Existential Psychologist, Paul Wong (2007) refers to Frankl as "the Prophet of Hope" and urges us all to embrace what Frankl calls tragic optimism (Frankl, 1984, p. 161) as we negotiate the inevitable difficulties of life.

Wong (2007) explains tragic optimism as the ability to maintain hope in spite of tragic experiences and to maintain the courage and tenacity to strive for a future goal, no matter how bleak. Wong argues that it is precisely from the prior experience of overcoming disappointments and adversities that we learn the importance of embracing the whole of life and believing that something good will happen only if we persist in our efforts.

This may sound to some like a repackaging of Nietzsche's aphorism that "what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger," but it has a more powerful positive message; you need to go *forward* into *risk*, *knowing that there will be failure* and knowing that this is the *only* journey to a good life. According to Frankl, we are each of us called to search for meaning in our own lives—hence the name of his book: *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946/1984); that in order to create meaning in life, one must focus on the *future* (pp. 94, 95, 120); one must focus on the gap between who one is now and who one wants to become (p. 127). One must embrace what he calls tragic optimism (p. 161) in the sense that one ought to accept that life *for all of us* is filled with pain, guilt, hardship, and death, but that one, nonetheless, ought to say "yes" to life (p. 161). We ought always to use our creativity to turn life's negative aspects into something positive or constructive, so that we become, what he refers to as "attitudinal heroes" (p. 172).

Wong stresses that it is important to differentiate between tragic optimism that is rooted in the reality that honestly confronts the seriousness of the situation at hand and the kind of unrealistic optimism that Weinstein (1987) suggests is associated with egocentrism. Unrealistic optimism results from a cognitive error that represents unrealistic, delusional optimism which may make people feel invulnerable and prevent them from taking the necessary precautions. And Christopher Peterson, in

[20] https://quotefancy.com/quote/1526521/Michael-Joseph-Oakeshott-To-try-to-do-something-which-is-inherently-impossible-is-always

his article "The Future of Optimism" (2000), likewise warns us of shades of optimism that are also less than positive. Thus, he notes that Freud (1928) viewed unrealistic positive thinking as a defense mechanism against harsh reality or an illusionary belief, which only served to prolong human misery.

Tragic optimism is not dissimilar to the notion of "grit" that Angela Duckworth describes in her book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (2018). Duckworth describes "grit" as resilience (p. 8), as a "never give up" attitude (p. 7), even when challenges appear to exceed our current skills (p. 6). And she notes research that has shown that Grit scores were the best predictors of who graduates from West Point, as well as job retention. She also notes, interestingly, that Grit scores are *inversely* related to SAT scores. Duckworth thus concludes that we are distracted by talent (p. 15); that zeal and hard work are ultimately more important than intellectual ability (p. 21). She goes on to suggest that this mythologizing of natural talent, like intelligence, is a strategy that we employ to let ourselves off the hook (p. 39). In support of this claim, she quotes Nietzsche (1986) as saying, "Our vanity, our self-love, promotes the cult of the genius. For if we think of genius as something magical, we are not obliged to compare ourselves and find ourselves lacking. . ." (p. 39). Duckworth reminds us of a Woody Allen quote that "eighty percent of success in life is showing up" (p. 49), and she goes on to argue that grit requires working with challenges that exceed our skills, which is contrary to the contemporary love affair with "flow" which is commonly experienced when challenge and skill are in balance (p. 129).

Educating for Forward Movement

It has been argued that, though we live in a world with less concentration of power and property than the world has ever seen (Piketty, 2022, p. 30), nonetheless fury over the continuing inequality continues to escalate. It has also been argued that if progress is to continue through this ever-more difficult terrain, Movers, after picking their battle, need to articulate a precise doable vision, learn to speak to the collective imagination, avoid cheap virtue signalling, and learn to maintain a tragically optimistic attitude.

If we take these two positions together, it is clear that for young people to take up the mantle of forward movement, an education that ensures that they are consistently immersed in the sort of dialogue offered by *Philosophy for Children* (P4C),[21] is an absolute necessity. Through participation in multiple *Communities of Inquiry* (CPIs) (the pedagogical touchstone of P4C), participants have the opportunity to develop the habit of transcending what might be their "default cognitive standpoint" (Baehr, p. 149), and so amplify the open-minded critical-thinking skills that enable them to resist indoctrination (Bar-Tal, 2020, p. 15), increase their awareness of the complexity of situations, and hence learn to critically evaluate and judge the nature and the course of intractable problems in the societies in which they live (Bar-Tal, 2020, p. 16).

However, even if P4C is on the agenda, there are a few necessities that a facilitator must embrace if enhancing forward movement is the goal. One important necessary condition is that the facilitator, herself, must be a tragic optimist and so ensure that the discussion doesn't get highjacked by

[21] https://www.icpic.org/

optimistic but unrealistic suggestions on the one hand and the sort of pessimism that emerges from imagined learned helplessness on the other.

It is also imperative to keep in mind that, if forward movement is the goal, the dynamic that takes place within the Community of Philosophical Inquiry will be somewhat different from the dynamic within a CPI when the goal is primarily to enhance good thinking. When the goal is the latter, it is assumed that good thinking emerges within a CPI because participants are confronted with and required to reflect on different viewpoints; however, the only condition for suitability of the topic is that it is contentious. When the goal is the former, it is crucial that the topic is sufficiently relevant that participants believe that how they think about the world is genuinely at stake. Having something at stake, of course, means that many of the ideas that participants articulate emerge from the structure of their own identities (Kizal, 2021), and hence keeping an open mind to alternative viewpoints can be threatening. It is for that reason that facilitators need to be aware that engaging young people (many of whom have been tribalized by social media and rewarded for cheap virtue signalling) in a process that itself may be characterized by open or covert power games (Kizel, 2021, p. 12), can be challenging in the extreme. Indeed, it is precisely for this reason, i.e., to avoid provoking anger from students, parents, their colleagues, administrators, and even the community at large (Bar-Tal et al., 2020, p. 13) that many educators steer clear of contentious issues (Bar-Tal et al., 2020, p. 7). And it is precisely for this reason that what Lukianoff & Haidt (2019) call "safetyism" (p. 32), i.e., requests for safe spaces, trigger warnings, microaggression training, bias response teams, etc., (p. 178) has been legitimized by many educators, but that, in turn, has resulted in distorting the educational process to such a degree that it is depriving young people of the sort of experience necessary to create well-educated, bold, and open-minded citizens (p. 178).

So, on the other hand, it is precisely for this reason that facilitators need grit in order to resist the pervasive threat of "progressivism," and to shun the safety inherent in the typical hierarchical student-teacher divide (Kizel, 2021, p. 4) and instead join their students with a sense of authentic comradery[22]—almost a sense of love (Catmull, 2014, p. 99)—in genuinely reflecting together on issues that are potentially inflammatory. It is through this togetherness, this community, that requires time and patience to build (Catmull, 2014, p. 131), that the possibility of genuinely new insights emerges that, in turn, may infuse fresh fuel into the potential for cautious optimism, as well as increasing confidence in the process itself and so making subsequent inquiries ever more fruitful.

In his classic book, *Thinking in Education* (1991), the founder of Philosophy for Children, Mathew Lipman described the intellectual movement in a Community of Philosophical Inquiry as that of a sailboat, tacking from side to side, but always forward (p. 15-16). The suggestions offered here are in the same spirit, but with the added recommendation that, with sufficient confidence in the crew, the captain need not, in fact *should* not, steer clear of choppy waters.[23]

[22] So that they feel sufficiently secure as to be able to express themselves independently and democratically (Kizel, 2021, p. 15).

[23] Kizel argues (2021, p. 17) that, many educators believe they know best what sort of subject young people ought and ought not to be exposed to and that, as a result "condescension can naturally creep in in the guise of responsibility." He goes on to argue that "As a 'responsible adult,' as it were, such a facilitator acts in a colonial fashion towards the child because, despite his or her good intentions, he or she thinks she knows what is best—right or wrong—for his or her young

It turns out, then, that an education for forward positive movement is not for wimps. However, if forward positive movement is the societal goal, it is hard to see how that is even remotely possible unless educators get on board.

Conclusion

Montaigne (1580), in his fascinating description of an interview with a high-ranking member of the Tupinambá people of Brazil, after having come to France and having been presented to the King and Queen, notes that this individual is, on the one hand, shocked by the evident inequality that is obvious in this strange country, and, on the other, perplexed by the fact that those who are "lean and half-starved with hunger and poverty," do "not take the others by the throat or set fires to their houses."

This comment by an individual who came from a high-resource little-populated area,[24] to a part of the world in the opposite extreme, reinforces the intertwining claims made above: that on the one hand, humans, like our primate cousin, have an in-built "inequity aversion," but, on the other, that the sort of inflammatory interchange that can be a product of this aversion tends to self-contain within fairly stable reference groups that are a product of labor-dividing, class systems that develop over thousands of years of condensed living conditions.

Such self-containment of this equity aversion is no longer viable. As contemporary winds slowly dismantle heretofore rigid class and caste systems, the desire to take those "others by the throat and set fire to their houses" flows ever farther afield.

For that reason, we must beware of letting the tail wag the dog (Haidt, 2001) by letting our ever-expanding natural aversion to inequity fuel unhelpful inflammatory emotion, rather than doing the hard work of reasoning together about how best to keep this march toward a more equal world going forward. As we have seen, even a brief analysis of the concepts of equality and equity reveals that articulating the goal, let alone a path toward that goal, is difficult since treating all people equally, even though their circumstances are vastly different, seems unconscionably unfair, while the goal of equity which seems to require wholesale destruction of individual liberty, to say nothing of varying levels of human industriousness and greed, seems to guarantee that neither the process nor outcome will be just.

The message of this essay, however, is that, nonetheless, progress can be made by articulating clear doable action plans that focus on small victories, which, because of their very size, are such that unexpected consequences are at least potentially manageable.

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charge: how he or she should behave or think. In this sense, he or she draws on age, experience, and maturity to pull rank."

[24] "Their disputes are not for the conquest of new lands, for these they already possess are so fruitful by nature, as to supply them without labor or concern, with all things necessary, in such abundance that they have no need to enlarge their borders" (Montaigne, 1580).

In order to enhance the wind beneath those wings, it is suggested that "Movers" attempt to articulate their vision by imagining themselves speaking to the collective highly differentiated imagination and that in the process they not only avoid virtue-signalling themselves, but as well beware of those who so indulge, while welcoming any who appear to be offering signals that count.

Limited, relatively unsexy attempts to alleviate wicked problems can lead quickly to burn-out. It is for that reason that we suggest that "Movers" strive to be attitudinal heroes by embracing tragic optimism, and having as their travel partner, the vision of Viktor Frankl, who continued to try and make the world a better place even while suffering from the brutality of a Nazi concentration camp, which, for years, had no end in sight.

Finally, we suggest, that if we seriously hope for continued progress, educators need to get on board by offering their students never-ending facilitated dialogical experiences of the sort often practiced in Philosophy for Children, but with the caveat that they need to be courageous in ensuring that young people have the opportunity to reflect on the difficult and often inflammatory issues that are of genuine relevance in the society in which they find themselves. It is only by developing the habit of engaging in genuine dialogue with those who think differently on issues in which we have *something at stake* that we will generate enough collective momentum to create a sustainable path forward, all of which will be facilitated if we keep reminding ourselves how far we've come and not just how far we have to go; that we may not be where we want to be, but neither are we where we used to be.[25]

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[25] A rewording of a quote from Rick Warren. https://www.azquotes.com/quotes/topics/how-far-you've-come.html

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