

Unclear Implications: Commentary on Norton and Ariely (2011)

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Abstract

Despite the suggestiveness of their empirical findings, I argue that the implications of Norton and Ariely's work are unclear, both morally and politically.

Keywords

inequality, equality, justice, morality, politics

Norton and Ariely (2011, this issue) surveyed Americans to discover what their ideal wealth distributions might look like. Although the results (people prefer far more egalitarian distributions than they actually obtain) are certainly suggestive, it is important to emphasize that, so far as I can see, these findings don't have any particular moral implications—that is, implications concerning what the distribution should be.

Although Norton and Ariely mention this point in passing, it would be easy to lose sight of it. After all, Norton and Ariely report asking those surveyed to choose between various distributions, from behind a “Rawlsian veil,” not knowing where they would be in the relevant society, but having an equal chance of being in any given position. And Rawls's theory (1971) is supposed to tell us what just social institutions would look like. Shouldn't we conclude, accordingly, that the preferred distribution is morally preferable?

Not necessarily. For this situation doesn't actually correspond to the one Rawls defended as suitable for determining fair policies. First of all, in Rawls's own theory, choosers are not supposed to make any assumptions about having an equal probability of ending up in any given position; they are to deliberate without regard to probabilities. Yet Norton and Ariely's respondents were explicitly instructed to assume they had an equal chance of ending up in any possible position, from richest to poorest. Second, in Rawls's theory, the choosers are conceived of as being perfectly rational, yet having no knowledge of their own actual moral beliefs. Obviously, however, Norton and Ariely's respondents are not perfectly rational, and presumably they chose in light of their own preexisting moral beliefs. So if someone wanted to argue for the moral relevance of these findings, it couldn't be by way of appeal to Rawls's own theory. Maybe there is some alternative moral argument

that takes off from these findings, but the authors of course, don't attempt to construct one.

Well, is it at least true that the findings might have political implications, concerning the possibility of bringing about a significantly more egalitarian distribution of wealth? They might; but of course they might not. To start with the obvious, precisely because such a huge portion of American wealth is held by such a tiny percentage of individuals, these individuals have an extraordinary interest in maintaining the currently inequalitarian distribution. And unlike the vast majority of Americans, who have so little and thus have so much to gain, this tiny minority has the immense resources to see to it that their interests are carefully attended to by lawmakers. Second, despite the suggestiveness of Norton and Ariely's findings, it isn't even clear that most Americans really would favor the relevant redistributive policies. After all, it is one thing to think that a given state of affairs is ideally preferable; it is quite another to be willing to embrace the various social changes (and policies) that would be required to bring such an ideal state to reality. Finally, agreement about an “in-principle” ideal is still compatible with radical disagreement about how to respond to the current situation or, for that matter, whether the current situation is even in any way morally objectionable. Indeed, one can quite consistently think it would be “ideal” to have greater equality, while still thinking that the current inequality is just, or fair, or deserved, or necessary. I don't myself hold any of

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these beliefs, but it is compatible with Norton and Ariely's data to worry that many Americans might nonetheless think something along these lines.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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