The Moral Significance of Class

The Moral Significance of Class analyses the moral aspects of people’s experience of class inequalities. Class affects not only our material wealth but our access to things, relationships and practices which we have reason to value, including the esteem or respect of others and hence our sense of self-worth. It shapes the kind of people we become and our chances of living a fulfilling life. Yet contemporary culture is increasingly ‘in denial’ about class, finding it embarrassing to acknowledge, even though it can often be blatantly obvious. By drawing upon concepts from moral philosophy and social theory and applying them to empirical studies of class, this fascinating and accessible study shows how people are valued in a context in which their life-chances and achievements are objectively affected by the lottery of birth class, and by forces which have little to do with their moral qualities or other merits.

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I was tempted to call this book ‘Think You’re Better Than Us, Do You?’, as that challenge, real or imagined, gets to the heart of the moral significance of class in everyday life. Class is not a reflection of moral worth or needs, and its relationship to merit is zero in childhood and more cause than effect later. Yet since class fundamentally affects the kind and quality of life we can lead its legitimacy is in question. This is what gives class its moral significance, not simply as a matter for moral and political philosophers to consider, but for our daily lived experience, in terms of how people treat and value one another. For all the many books on class in social science, remarkably few of them analyse the moral dimension of class. This is because of the wider problem, particularly in sociology, of what Axel Honneth terms ‘anti-normativism’, which renders opaque the evaluative character of our relationship to the world. In particular our concerns – the things that matter to us for our well-being, the things which we value and care about – are either ignored or dealt with in an alienated and alienating way which fails to identify why they matter so much.

Although this book is very much about the moral texture of everyday, lay, experience, I shall use concepts and analyses from philosophical literature on ethics – much of it normative – as well as sociology, to interpret lay responses to class. This is an unusual combination – indeed it is an experiment – but I hope to convince readers of its value primarily by example. At the same time I shall use and refer to many concepts which are simple and indeed familiar in everyday life, but my belief is that such is their familiarity that they are taken for granted instead of analysed. When we do examine them, we frequently find that they are rich in explanatory resources and normative implications.

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