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Subordination and the Wrong of Discrimination

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Abstract

Sophia Moreau, in her important book, offers an insightful account of (one strand of) the wrong of discrimination based on the evil of subordination. My symposium contribution seeks to clarify the structure of Moreau's account of subordination and its normative and axiological status. On one plausible view, subordination is fundamentally bad or wrong. On another view, subordination is a distinctive social phenomenon, which is bad or wrong only derivatively. I will outline each view, and consider the implications each has for certain issues central to Moreau's book.

Résumé

Sophia Moreau, dans son livre important, offre un compte rendu instructif de l'un des aspects de la discrimination répréhensible, soit celui basé sur le fléau de la subordination. Ma contribution au symposium vise à clarifier la structure de la présentation de Moreau sur la subordination et son statut normatif et axiologique. La première interprétation plausible veut que la subordination soit fondamentalement mauvaise ou immorale. La seconde est à l'effet que la subordination est un phénomène social distinctif, qui n'est mauvais ou immoral que de manière dérivée. Je décrirai chaque point de vue et examinerai les implications de chacun pour certaines questions au cœur de l'ouvrage de Moreau.

Keywords: discrimination; subordination; social equality; status inequality; structural disadvantage

1. Introduction

Sophia Moreau's book, *Faces of Inequality*, develops a distinctive egalitarian account of discrimination and what makes it wrongful. As such, it makes an important contribution to our understanding of both discrimination and the moral, political, and social ideal of equality.

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Moreau argues that discrimination wrongs its victims by “failing to treat them as the equals of others” (p. 7).¹ Much of her book is dedicated to articulating three different ways in which discrimination may fail to treat its victims as the equals of others: by subordinating them, by depriving them of deliberative freedom, and by depriving them of basic goods. My discussion here will be solely concerned with Moreau’s discussion of subordination, and specifically of what Moreau calls “social subordination,” “the state of affairs in which one social group has a standing in society as a whole that is lower than that of another social group” (p. 50).

Subordination (like deliberative freedom and basic goods) plays what we may call a “bridging role” in Moreau’s theoretical account: it is introduced to explain how, or *in virtue of what*, discrimination violates the general moral requirement to treat persons as the equals of others, and thus wrongs them (p. 41). Moreau proposes that it is often the contribution (constitutive or causal) that discrimination makes to social subordination that explains why discrimination wrongs its victims. My concern in this article is with clarifying how we are to understand this proposal.

I begin with outlining (in Sections 2, 3, and 4) Moreau’s account of subordination in general, and social subordination in particular; how discrimination contributes to it; and how social subordination wrongs by failing to treat its victims as if they were not the equals of others.

Next I raise a worry: subordination is not wrongful as such. Indeed, some instances of subordination are not wrongful at all. So, in virtue of what does *wrongful* subordination (including wrongful social subordination) fail to treat its victims as if they were not the equals of others? I explore, in Section 5, what may seem like the natural answer in light of existing philosophical discussions of subordination and social equality: social subordination is wrongful in virtue of one or another of the constitutive components that Moreau identifies, most obviously what she calls “*Unequal Consideration*” or “*Unequal Power*.” I raise doubts about this explanation, highlighting in particular that *Unequal Consideration* and *Unequal Power* are objectionable independently of their role in constituting social subordination. So, even if discrimination contributes to objectionable instances of *Unequal Consideration* or *Unequal Power*, the appeal to social subordination in our explanation of what makes discrimination ultimately wrongful remains otiose.

This does not, however, mean that the appeal to social subordination is explanatorily otiose altogether. I distinguish three different contributions that it makes to our understanding of wrongful discrimination. First, social subordination might explain why particular instances of *Unequal Power* are, in fact, objectionable (since not all are). Second, social subordination, which plausibly involves patterns of social advantage and disadvantage that are mutually reinforcing in their genesis and persistence as well as in their effects, might be wrong because of its overall unfair impact on people’s lives (assessed in terms other than *Unequal Consideration* or *Unequal Power*). Discrimination might, then, be wrong because it contributes to such unfair impact via its contribution to social subordination. Third, discrimination might ultimately be wrong only because it contributes to wrongful *Unequal Consideration* and *Unequal Power* (and so social subordination need not enter into our account of what

¹ All standalone page citations are to Moreau (2020).

makes discrimination wrong). Yet, the social mechanisms at play in social subordination might make it distinctly challenging to address the underlying wrongs social subordination instantiates, and thus explain why social subordination is of special *practical* importance to us, even if its ultimate moral valence derives from independently specifiable concerns. This last point seems to me the most plausible; and it suggests some general lessons for philosophical reflection on practically salient social and legal phenomena.

2. Moreau on Subordination

Subordination is a matter of one person having status or standing that is below that of another. It includes such obviously problematic cases as one person's being another's slave. But it also includes much less obviously problematic cases, such as one person being under another's military authority.

"Social subordination" is the term Moreau introduces to pick out a special instance of subordination: "the state of affairs in which one *social group* has a standing in society as a whole that is lower than that of another social group" (p. 50, emphasis added). Social groups are taken to be groups that share, or are presumed by others to share, a trait that is *socially salient*: a trait, that is, that "others in society take ... to have implications for the character and behavior of members of the group, and for the social roles that they are capable of occupying" (pp. 50–51). Familiar examples of social subordination are caste systems or feudal societies in which persons are assigned to different groups that have a (relatively) determinate place in a complex social hierarchy of such groups.

Moreau does not offer a general account of what inferior social standing, either for an individual or for a group, consists in. Rather, she identifies four conditions "as a set of common and morally salient features of situations involving the unjust subordination of one social group by another," which are usually (though not always) all met "when one social group is subordinated for some substantial period of time" (p. 62).

1. *Unequal Power*: First, "in most situations of social subordination, members of the subordinated social group have less power than members of other groups, across a variety of social contexts" (p. 51). They also generally have less *de facto* authority, understood to include not just "the power to secure others' obedience" but also a broader set of socially important powers, such as "the power *to be listened to*, and to be taken seriously when one brings a complaint against another" (p. 52).
2. *Unequal Consideration*: Second, members of the subordinated group "have, or are ascribed, traits that attract less consideration or greater censure across a number of different social contexts than the corresponding traits of the empowered group" (p. 62). "Consideration" is a matter of being shown "deference and respect," and of one's interests being "given greater priority, even in situations where they ought to be weighed equally with those of others" (p. 53). Moreover, the traits that consideration tracks "are not just regarded as pleasing or as important for certain limited purposes ... but as traits that mark people

out as belonging to a higher or better class of people, per se” (p. 53). “Censure,” in turn, is the negative counterpart to consideration: “the use” of certain traits “to condemn, publicly humiliate, or ostracize” the members of the group who possess, or are thought to possess, certain traits (p. 54).

3. *Stereotypes*: Third, the socially salient traits associated with the group “are the subject of stereotypes, which help to rationalize the differences in power and de facto authority, the habits of consideration and censure, and the structural accommodations” (p. 62). They “rationalize” these differences, not by justifying them, but by constituting “the kind of proposed justification that is plausible enough that many people in fact accept them,” or by “making us think that *there is no need to justify* certain ways of treating others” (p. 55).
4. *Structural Accommodation*: Fourth, “[t]here are structural accommodations in place in society that tacitly accommodate the needs of a superior group while overlooking the needs of at least some members of the subordinate group; and these accommodations work together with stereotypes to rationalize the differences in power and de facto authority and the differences in consideration or censure” (p. 62).

3. Discrimination and Subordination

Discrimination often contributes to social subordination, either causally or constitutively. When it does, then this explains, Moreau proposes, what makes discrimination wrongful.

Direct discrimination occurs when a practice or policy treats a person P “less favorably on the basis of some trait, *t*, than it would treat those who [lack] *t*,” where the relevant trait *t* is either a prohibited ground of discrimination (such as race, gender, sex, sexual orientation, etc.) or “very closely connected” to a trait that is (pp. 63–64). Direct discrimination so understood can “constitute an expression of censure of the subordinated group, or an expression of lack of deference toward them” (p. 65), and thus be itself an *instance* of (rather than just a causal contributor to) *Unequal Consideration*. But direct discrimination can also causally sustain the conditions of social subordination outlined in Section 2. For instance, Jim Crow laws perpetuate conditions in which black Americans had less power and authority than whites, were ascribed various undesirable traits “because of their ... blackness,” and thus given unequal consideration, and were disadvantaged by structural accommodations that privileged the needs and interests of white Americans (p. 64). In either case, discrimination is, one might think, wrongful because of its relation to social subordination: either because it is itself an instance of wrongful social subordination, or because it causally contributes to wrongful social subordination.

Indirect discrimination occurs where a practice or policy does not specifically single out someone on the basis of a prohibited ground, yet “disproportionately disadvantage[s] those who have a trait that amounts to a prohibited ground of discrimination” (p. 65). Indirectly discriminatory policies can, Moreau observes, causally contribute to sustaining social subordination by amounting to “the kind of structural accommodation that privileges other groups over a given group, reinforces stereotypes about that group, and indirectly rationalizes habits of censure and lesser

consideration of them” (p. 67). But indirect discrimination can also constitute social subordination, insofar as it marks a group out as inferior to others by making them *socially invisible* to others. So, indirect discrimination too wrongs its victims in virtue of its contribution — be it causal or constitutive — to wrongful social subordination, according to Moreau.

4. Explaining the Wrong of Subordinating Discrimination

The explanation of the wrong of discrimination via its contribution to social subordination rests on the thought that social subordination is wrongful. But when, and why, is social subordination wrongful?

Moreau argues that social subordination is wrongful because it violates a moral requirement to treat others as equals, according to which “everyone [should] be respected, with no one treated as though they had a status below that of others” (p. 8). This abstract requirement of equality is, in fact, a combination of two closely related ideas: “first, that everyone should be treated as though they were just as deserving of respect as others; and second, that everyone should be treated as though they were deserving of respect, in absolute terms” (p. 8). What is troubling about wrongful discrimination is, then, that it amounts to treating the victims “*as though they were not the equals of others*” (p. 9).

Importantly, failing to treat people in accordance with the abstract requirement of equality *wrongs* them (and is thus *wrongful*). But it need not be all things considered *wrong* (though it often is): sometimes wronging someone can be justified all things considered, if something sufficiently important is at stake.

Social subordination is, according to Moreau, one way in which this abstract requirement to treat others as equals can be violated. (Violations of agents’ rights to deliberative freedom, and to certain fundamental basic goods, are others.) As she explains: “When we disadvantage some people relative to others on the basis of certain traits [i.e., when we discriminate against them] ... we often seem to be failing to treat them as the equals of others in the sense that we are *unfairly subordinating* them to others, putting them beneath others” (p. 39).

One might think that social subordination violates the abstract requirement to treat some people as though they were the equals of others because subordination *simpliciter* violates that requirement, and social subordination is an instance of subordination *simpliciter*. This thought may be invited by the linguistic parallels in Moreau’s characterizations of the abstract requirement that prohibits treating people “as though they had a status below that of others” (p. 8), and of subordination, which is a matter of one person or group being put “beneath others” (p. 39).

But the matter is, in fact, more complicated. As Moreau highlights, not all subordination is wrongful or unfair, and thus violates the abstract requirement of equality. For instance, Moreau allows that the position of a soldier relative to his commanding officer is one of subordination, as may be that of many employees in relation to their employers or managers. Yet, Moreau proposes, such functionally motivated social hierarchies can be “justified” (p. 41) as long as “the differences in status hold only within a particular organization, rather than across a number of different social contexts, and only to the extent that those with the higher status require this status in

order to fulfil the legitimate demands of their particular institutional roles” (p. 40). Importantly, to say that these instances of subordination are “justified” is *not* to say that they wrong their victims yet are all things considered justified (because something sufficiently important is at stake). The functional justification just sketched instead establishes that the unequal relation between soldier and officer is not wrongful or unfair in the first place. Since it would wrong the soldier or the employee if they were treated “*as though they were not the equals of others*” (p. 9), it must be the case that the soldier and employee are not, in fact, treated as though they were not their officer’s or manager’s equal *in the sense relevant to the abstract requirement of equality*. Correlatively, we cannot infer from the fact of subordination that the abstract requirement of equality has been violated; nor can we infer from the fact that *social* subordination is an instance of subordination that social subordination is wrongful.

So, what explains the wrong of *social subordination*, and thus, ultimately, the wrong of discrimination that contributes to social subordination?

5. Is Social Subordination Explanatorily Otiose?

In this section, I discuss one perhaps quite intuitive way of explaining what makes social subordination wrongful. This explanation fits with some things that Moreau says (though, as I point out below, she also gestures in the direction of an alternative view I discuss in the next section). But beyond this, this explanation seems to me suggested by much of the existing philosophical literature on subordination and closely related phenomena like status hierarchy or social inequality. Discussions of these phenomena loom large in recent political and social philosophy; and they are often invoked precisely to explain what makes certain social practices morally objectionable (or, conversely, attractive) (see Anderson, 2012; Kolodny, 2023; Viehoff, 2019).

On the explanation I have in mind, subordination is *essentially* constituted by *Unequal Consideration* or *Unequal Power*: these features are what allow us to say that one person’s social status is *below* that of another. (*Stereotypes* and *Structural Accommodation* are important because they causally contribute to or sustain these essential features.) And what makes subordination (including social subordination) wrongful (if it is) is just that *Unequal Consideration* and *Unequal Power* are wrongful. Correspondingly, discrimination is wrongful if and because it contributes to wrongful *Unequal Consideration* or wrongful *Unequal Power*.

I think that this explanation of the wrong of discrimination ultimately makes appeals to social subordination otiose. This doesn’t mean that the explanation is mistaken. But it is a reason to think that it may not be the explanation that best fits with Moreau’s account, which does, after all, seek to explain the wrong of discrimination by appeal to social subordination.

a. *Unequal Consideration*

Imagine one takes the view that subordination is (partly) constituted by *Unequal Consideration*: showing unequal deference or respect, or giving unequal weight to

someone's interests. (*Unequal Consideration* includes, remember, unequal censure.²) As Moreau observes, *Unequal Consideration* — which involves “taking the praise or criticism that is due to a certain *trait* and transferring it to the *person* across a variety of other contexts” — is “always unjustified” and thus wrongful (p. 62). This stands in contrast to *Unequal Power*, *Structural Accommodation*, and even *Stereotypes*, which “may sometimes be innocuous” and “become problematic only when they work together to consign certain social groups to a lesser status in society” (p. 62).

Why is *Unequal Consideration* always unjustified? It cannot be, I think, that unequal consideration is particularly *harmful* to its victims, or more harmful than Moreau's other three conditions. Nor is it simply that, in mistakenly taking the response due to a trait and applying it to the person, we make an error. After all, I could also simply make an error about your trait (I might, for instance, think that you are a bad singer when you are, in fact, a very good one), and that would not be similarly morally problematic. Moreau's observation, that it involves adopting responses that are due to a certain trait and transferring them *to the person*, suggests rather that *Unequal Consideration* constitutes an inherently objectionable way of *relating to others*: as someone who, *as a person*, is entitled to less deference and respect, or as someone whose interests matter less. This is inherently incompatible with the abstract egalitarian requirement of equal respect, and thus *Unequal Consideration* is unjustified *per se*.

Let's grant that *Unequal Consideration* is indeed always wrongful. Still, not all instances of subordination involve *Unequal Consideration*. This is necessarily true when subordination involves no wrongdoing, as when the soldier is subordinate to his officer. But it is also true (though perhaps less obviously so) in some cases in which subordination wrongs its victim. For instance, there are plenty of cases in which wrongful discrimination neither involves nor contributes to *Unequal Consideration*. Consider certain cases of indirect discrimination, as when recruitment for firefighter positions involves physical stamina tests that men are more likely to meet than women. It seems to me doubtful that this involves *Unequal Consideration*: the male applicants are not shown unequal deference or respect. Nor are their interests given unequal weight in the hiring decision. They are simply advantaged in ways that are unnecessary, given the demands of the job. Perhaps one might be tempted to think that, though the indirect discrimination does not involve *Unequal Consideration*, it contributes to it, insofar as firefighters are treated with distinctive respect and admiration in our society. But the problem of indirect discrimination persists even if the role for which the candidates are competing is less highly regarded. (Imagine that the position they are seeking is not that of firefighter, but that of garbage collector.)

The more important point for our purposes is, however, another one. Let's assume that *Unequal Consideration* is a constitutive element of social subordination. And

² What Moreau calls “structural accommodation” sometimes constitutes a form of unequal consideration. Structural accommodation often renders a group invisible; and treating someone as invisible might be an especially deep-reaching way in which to treat someone's views or interests as less important than those of others. But, as Moreau explains, not all instances of structural accommodation are instances of unequal consideration (p. 57).

imagine that an instance of discrimination involves *Unequal Consideration*, and therefore wrongs its victim. Still, it does not follow that discrimination wrongs its victim *in virtue of its connection to social subordination*. The wrong of *Unequal Consideration* exists even in the absence of social subordination. As Moreau observes, to socially subordinate someone usually requires some form of social power (p. 47). So, the socially powerless lack the capacity to subordinate. But they do *not* lack the capacity to treat others with unequal consideration. And when they do treat others with unequal consideration, they wrong them. So, the wrong of *Unequal Consideration* does not depend on its contribution to social subordination.

Here is the worry, then, in a nutshell: even if *Unequal Consideration* is constitutive of social subordination, and social subordination is wrongful, if social subordination is wrongful because it is constituted by *Unequal Consideration*, and it is not the case that *Unequal Consideration* is wrongful because it socially subordinates, then why bother to invoke social subordination to explain the wrong of discrimination? Why not go straight from discrimination to *Unequal Consideration*, and cut out the explanatory intermediary that is social subordination?

b. Unequal Power

A similar worry arises when we turn to what is often thought to be the other constitutive element of (social) subordination, *Unequal Power*. (*Unequal Power* includes, remember, both unequal power and unequal *de facto* authority.³) As Moreau flags, not all instances of unequal power give rise to objectionable inequality of status. The subordination relation between soldier and officer is, for instance, best understood as grounded in the officer's asymmetrical power and authority that he has over the soldier. Correlatively, the inequality seems unobjectionable if it is motivated by, and limited to, the functional needs of a justified organization. The soldier is not, that is, wronged by the social hierarchy that structures his relation to the officer.

If unequal power is wrong, is it wrong *in virtue of* its connection to subordination (social or other)? That too is doubtful. Sometimes unequal power is problematic as such, because it is incompatible with certain attractive egalitarian relationships (see, e.g., Viehoff, 2014). But often this ideal of an egalitarian relationship is either inapposite or otherwise unobtainable between the parties to an interaction. This does not mean that their power relation is morally unproblematic. But if it is problematic, it is so on grounds other than the inequality in power.

Here is a brief sketch of what I take to be a plausible view of the morality of power: power and authority give one person control over another's choices. If those choices are ones that the subject is otherwise entitled to make freely, guided by her own personal projects and goals, then another's power over her is morally objectionable. But if she is not entitled to have these choices available to her for the pursuit of her own personal projects and goals, or if there is an adequate justification for another's

³ Moreau also includes, in her characterization of unequal power, one's standing to be listened to. Without wanting to deny that one could adopt this characterization, it is worth mentioning that this could also be subsumed under the header of "*Unequal Consideration*," and would be objectionable for the reasons mentioned in the previous section.

having control over her choices despite her entitlement, then the power relation is not morally objectionable.

On this view, power relations are in need of justification, and they may wrong us if an adequate justification is lacking. But this problem does not, at bottom, rest on concerns for equality in power. There is just as much of a problem if we exercise power over each other equally or symmetrically, and each deprive the other of choices to which that person is entitled. (It may be that power is especially likely to be unjustified when it is unequal; or that the control that power gives us over another can be constrained if that person has power over us in turn. But this doesn't change the fact that what does the explanatory work is not the inequality in power, but the lack of justification.)

But if power is problematic for these reasons, then its problematic character does not depend on its relation to subordination. So, if discrimination is wrongful because it contributes to *Unequal Power*, then we can once again just focus directly on the real problem — unjustified power relations — and abandon the unnecessary appeal to subordination.

6. Reconsidering the Significance of Social Subordination

Does this mean that the appeal to social subordination is, in fact, otiose, and we can do without it when giving an account of the wrong of discrimination? No. There are, in fact, three ways in which social subordination remains relevant. First, it may explain why *Unequal Power* is violated when it is (viz., because the distribution of power is unjustified). Second, it may explain why social arrangements are unfair in the distribution of advantages and disadvantages (other than power and consideration). Third, it may explain why we are *especially practically concerned* with certain cases of discrimination, even if what makes discrimination ultimately wrongful can be specified independently of reference to social subordination.

a. Mutually Reinforcing Patterns of (Dis)Advantage

Each of the three explanations I will sketch presupposes an understanding of what social subordination is that, I think, fits well with Moreau's own discussion, though it emphasizes certain features of the phenomenon that other views might neglect. On the understanding I have in mind, social subordination is a distinctive social phenomenon that is constituted by *mutually reinforcing patterns of social advantage and disadvantage*. They are mutually reinforcing in two different though related ways.

First, they are systematically related in their *genesis* and *persistence*: certain disadvantages cause, and sustain, other disadvantages — just as certain advantages cause, and sustain, other advantages. Consider, for instance, how growing up in an impoverished neighbourhood not only deprives children of many goods in the short term; often it also deprives them of long-term educational opportunities and benefits, which in turn limit their option to move into more affluent neighbourhoods with superior professional and educational opportunities. As a result, these patterns are *distinctly robust, and difficult to change*: attempts to change any one of them will likely have little to no effect as long as the others remain in place.

Second, these patterns are mutually reinforcing in their *effects*: even though any one of the social norms, expectations, rules, laws, etc. might only have a minor impact on the quality of someone's life, together they have a very large impact. Indeed, the impact that they have together is qualitatively different from the impact that any one, or even just a few, of them would have. The underlying idea is familiar from philosophical discussions of oppression: to borrow Marilyn Frye's powerful image, social practices that are each individually almost invisible (like a thin wire that is easy to ignore or avoid) can jointly create a cage that we cannot escape (Frye, 1983). To make this concrete, consider again an example: the interlocking effects of policies, expectations, stereotypes, and structural barriers together deprive certain socially salient groups (e.g., women, the disabled, etc.) of access to certain professional opportunities, even though any one of these phenomena would only have a relatively minor effect. (Indeed, any one of these phenomena by itself might also exist for members of other groups that are not similarly disadvantaged. This explains some of the complicated dynamics in debates about discrimination, where members of advantaged groups often point to very specific ways in which they too suffer the same "local" disadvantage that the law regulates with regard to disadvantaged groups. They might be right that they do suffer this local disadvantage; but they overlook that they are not subject to the same systematic patterns of disadvantage.)

I think that this understanding of social subordination fits well with Moreau's own characterization, which highlights the importance of *Stereotypes* and *Structural Accommodation*. These are the very kinds of social practices that are likely to reinforce certain advantages and disadvantages that attach to the characteristics of certain groups. This understanding also explains why *Unequal Consideration* and *Unequal Power* are commonly (but not necessarily) at issue in social subordination. Unequal power, unless sharply curtailed and carefully supervised, reinforces existing advantages and disadvantages. And unequal consideration — which, according to Moreau, involves giving greater or lesser consideration to certain traits "across a number of social contexts" — similarly reinforces many advantages and disadvantages, and interacts with other phenomena to impose a qualitatively distinct burden on the victims (p. 62).

b. Three Ways in Which Social Subordination Remains Important

Against this background, we can now return to the question of whether appeals to social subordination are otiose in an account of discrimination and its normative significance, and sketch three ways in which they are not.

First, social subordination might explain why an inequality in power is, in fact, wrongful rather than morally unobjectionable: power relations are unlikely to be justified on the basis of the kinds of generalizations about groups and their traits that are essential to social subordination. On this view, social subordination plays an important, though in some sense secondary, part in explaining what makes discrimination wrongful. It is important, because it explains why *Unequal Power* is violated. It is secondary only because the ultimate wrong is that of unjustified unequal power.⁴

⁴ Notice that an analogous argument could not be offered for *Unequal Consideration*: since giving people unequal consideration is wrongful as such, we do not need social subordination to explain what makes it wrong in a particular instance.

Second, social subordination may explain the wrong of discrimination without relying on any wrong that is specifically associated with *Unequal Consideration* or *Unequal Power*. Instead the wrong of social subordination may derive from the more general problem of *unfairly distributing social advantages and disadvantages*. Advantages and disadvantages are a matter of what is in our interest, or makes our lives go better (or worse). In this sense, we have interests in good healthcare and delicious food, in educational and professional opportunities, in personal autonomy and valuable friendships, and many other things. How our society is organized bears on whether we have, or are deprived of, access to the goods that make our lives go better; and we often have moral complaints against the social arrangements under which we live if we are deprived of such access without adequate justification.⁵

The wrong of social subordination so understood is derivative, rather than normatively fundamental. What is ultimately morally objectionable is the unfair distribution of social advantages and disadvantages. Social subordination is objectionable because it instantiates, or causally contributes to, such an unfair distribution.⁶ But social subordination is evidently not explanatorily otiose: the mutually reinforcing patterns of advantage essential to subordination are central to explaining what makes the distribution of benefits and burdens involved in social subordination unfair. Discrimination might be wrong because it contributes to an unfair distribution of social advantages and disadvantages. But to understand *how* discrimination makes this contribution, we must recognize the mutually reinforcing patterns to which discrimination contributes — that is, we need to invoke social subordination.⁷

Third, social subordination might be explanatorily important, not because it is necessary to account for what makes discrimination wrongful (which might just be its contribution to *Unequal Consideration*, *Unequal Power*, or a concern for unfair distributions of advantages and disadvantages), but because it explains what makes addressing discrimination especially *practically important or urgent*. Because social subordination is self-reinforcing, it is especially difficult to address. And because social subordination depends on an interlocking set of norms and expectations that range across various contexts, it is often especially pervasive in its effects on the lives of individuals. Consequently, social subordination, though it does not

⁵ Notice that we can find the distribution of social advantages and disadvantages unfair without having to be committed to any particular distributive principle. It could just be that the burdens on some are so great that they have an objection to suffering it, and that no other considerations — be it their opportunity to do better by making other choices, or the benefits that the existing arrangement provides to others — suffice to answer their objection.

⁶ If social subordination also involves *Unequal Power* and *Unequal Consideration*, then it is also — derivatively — objectionable for that reason.

⁷ An anonymous reviewer has raised the worry that appeals to distributive unfairness of this sort are incompatible with Moreau's relational egalitarian commitments. But I don't think they need to be. First, I think that much that is written in defence of relational egalitarianism establishes that relational equality is sufficient to ground certain egalitarian claims, and that it will ground certain egalitarian claims for which a purely distributive conception of equality cannot account. But it does not (or at least need not) deny that there could also be separate distributive concerns. Second, even a stronger view — that all distributive concerns are ultimately grounded in relational concerns — is compatible with the position I sketch here, since that position makes no claims about what grounds the complaint about the distribution of advantages and disadvantages.

explain what makes discrimination fundamentally wrong, does explain why discrimination — qua contributor to social subordination — is the proper focus of distinct legal and social attention.

On this understanding, appeals to social subordination are not necessary to explain what makes discrimination morally wrong. (That could be achieved by appealing more directly to *Unequal Consideration*, *Unequal Power*, or some notion of unfairness.) But they are necessary to explain the normative significance of discrimination in a more general sense: the urgency we attach to it.

I am inclined to think that this last explanation of the role that social subordination plays in our understanding of discrimination is the most practically significant. This, in turn, has theoretical (or, perhaps better, methodological) import. It is tempting for philosophers to assume that when the law is concerned with a morally salient phenomenon like discrimination, it must be tracking something that has fundamental moral significance. But I think that we should reject this. The law serves to address social problems, not answer philosophical questions. And often something is a clearly defined social problem in need of legal and social attention even though its moral valence, however clear, is ultimately derivative from a philosophical perspective. Social subordination, as Moreau characterizes it, may fall into this category.

7. Conclusion

This brief article has sought to shed light on the precise role that appeals to social subordination play in an account of discrimination and its moral significance.

Moreau's subtle and insightful account of social subordination emphasizes two features of social subordination that most other theorists of social inequality have neglected: *Stereotypes* and *Structural Accommodation*. These are not just causal contributors to the features that are more familiar from discussions of social status equality, that is, *Unequal Consideration* and *Unequal Power*. They are, rather, central to social subordination as a distinctive phenomenon that is worthy of special attention, both because of its detrimental effects on its victims and because of the difficulty of rectifying these effects in the face of the robustness of subordination relations. This, I have suggested, sheds light on the explanatory importance of appeals to social subordination, which might rest less on their role in accounting for an ultimate wrong, than on their role in explaining why certain wrongs that are in principle independently specifiable are in need of particular legal and political attention.

Let me conclude with a very brief, and rather tentative, observation. It seems to me plausible that much (though not all) of the work done under the header of relational egalitarianism is concerned with what is morally salient rather than what is morally fundamental. This is not a criticism. Perhaps philosophers should care more about what is morally salient, and less about what is morally fundamental. But it is a problem when we misunderstand the status of what we are discussing, and mistake moral salience for moral fundamentality. Part of what makes Moreau's book interesting and important for philosophers interested in equality is that it is clearly driven by a concern for what is morally salient. Indeed, even this article's quest for what is ultimately wrong about discrimination might be an imposition on Moreau's book of a concern

that is not truly hers. If so, I might only have reached, via a quite indirect route, an insight Moreau's book embodied from the start.

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