Robert E. Goodin, *Perpetuating Advantage: Mechanisms of Structural Injustice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 258 pages. ISBN: 9780192888204.

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Bob Goodin's recent book is a sophisticated and wide-ranging account of the processes that result in social structures creating and reinforcing (dis)advantage over time. The premise of the book is that writers on structural injustice have paid insufficient attention to the *mechanisms* through which advantage is perpetuated through structures. Goodin provides an engaging argument outlining what these mechanisms are, how they operate, and why – even in the absence of any ill will – they are likely to repeatedly occur. The book is cleverly both specific and general, providing exacting and empirically grounded explanations of particular instances of structural injustice while, at the same time, using central features of social cooperation to explain the phenomenon of structural injustice as a whole. The descriptive task then has a normative upshot: the aim is to "understand the mechanisms perpetuating unjust advantage in hopes of disrupting them" (p. 4).

Goodin begins with some comments on methodology, two of which are particularly noteworthy. The first is that Goodin intentionally remains (at least mostly) agnostic on what injustice actually is or how it initially comes about (p. 1). This is because Goodin takes there to be no reason to think that the mechanisms that perpetuate 'innocent' injustice are not just precisely the same mechanisms that perpetuate advantage in general. If that is true, then "we do not need to decide in advance which patterns of advantage are unjust, and which are not, in order to decide what mechanisms are of interest" (p. 11). While having a book about structural injustice stay silent

on the nature of justice might make the reader raise an eyebrow in surprise, it is a methodological move to isolate the relevant phenomena. The aim in avoiding controversial debates about justice is to leave readers free to fill in the details about the wrongness of relative advantage how they like, such that the book's conclusions are relevant to normative theorists of all stripes. Although, in claiming perpetuating an advantage that was initially just can even be wrong (p. 13), Goodin's argument does seem committed to an account of justice that is at least partially patterned (not that this greatly diminishes its relevance).

The second is that an emphasis on mechanisms might go some way to resolving the apparent paradoxical nature of structural injustice, insofar as calling some process or outcome a structural one might be to suggest a lack of the action and agency that is required by the notion of injustice. A real merit of Goodin's book is how it exploits the concepts of mechanisms and drivers to characterize the interplay between structures and agency in an intricate way, retaining the role of agential action (ensuring the structures are indeed wrong and thereby an 'injustice' and not just a bad), but also the impersonal and opaque manner through which processes advantage some over others (ensuring the injustice is a 'structural' one and not a directly interpersonal one). For Goodin, most of "the seemingly agency-free structures that perpetuate advantage and disadvantage actually have some sort of human agency standing somewhere in the background" (p. 7). This background agency is simply those mechanisms in social structures that work to constrain choices in certain respects while enabling it in others (p. 2).

Turning now to the meat of the book: the mechanisms themselves. A process is a mechanism of structural injustice insofar as it enables advantage to be retained, expanded,

replicated, or recreated, such that having an advantage in one period leads to having the same or further advantages in subsequent periods (pp. 21-22). Goodin identifies six interrelated mechanisms, each of which perpetuates unequal advantage in its own way: 1) position in a hierarchy, 2) networks, 3) language, 4) social expectations and norms, 5) reputation, and 6) coordination and organization. Two features about our social life then act as drivers to explain why these mechanisms occur repeatedly: the opportunities brought about by scale effects, and the constraints that are imposed by attention scarcity. In a short review like this one I cannot hope to do justice to the depth and breadth of Goodin's account, so I'll outline just a few examples to give a flavour of the processes that Goodin sheds light on. The norms of deference and obeyance for instance give positional advantages to those with high station and only snowball the more they are used (pp. 44-45). Networks produce unequal advantage thanks to self-sorting behaviour whereby those who enjoy an advantage will only end up connected to more networks and be more centrally located within them (pp. 60-61). While language and the standardization of codes perpetuate advantage through the costs imposed on those forced to learn the lingua franca or those who don't fit neatly into the 'normal' categories (pp. 85-88). Goodin's account of these mechanisms is an exemplar of the sort of empirically sensitive normative philosophy for which he is famous, and his command across fields such as economics, sociology, history, and psychology, and his ability to intertwine the insights from each into a cohesive whole, is astounding.

When it comes to strategies to overcome structural injustice, Goodin comes to the self-avowed pessimistic conclusion that direct attacks on the mechanisms themselves or the differential advantages they confer are likely to either fail or come at too high a cost (p. 179). Abandoning the mechanisms would only be to level down, "destroying instruments that are valuable in absolute

terms to a great many people (maybe literally all people)" (p. 180). While there are some cases where direct interruption might be feasible – preventing economic agents reaping all the benefits from scale effects is one such case (p. 184) – these are merely exceptions that prove the rule. Therefore, the best we can hope for are ameliorative 'work-arounds' that lessen the mechanisms' worse effects (p. 187). In other words, while structural injustice can be mitigated, the prospects for overcoming it entirely are grim (pp. 197-198).

Two comments about that conclusion. First, determining how we weigh the relative costs/wrongs of destroying the mechanisms on the one hand, and the unequal advantages they perpetuate on the other, is going to be dependent on what we think justice is and requires. For example, if the social advantages from leaving the mechanisms in place enabled those, who were albeit relatively disadvantaged, to be above a meaningful threshold, or even to enjoy the highest possible position available to the worst-off, then for proponents of certain distributive rules of justice the wrong of the disadvantage will be less severe. (Indeed, it might not even be a 'wrong': if I'm a sufficientarian, and the cost of destroying the mechanism is that individuals fall below the threshold, then why would these structures perpetuating relative advantage be unjust?) On the flip side, relational egalitarians think status inequalities are relevant to justice not only for their instrumental connection to distributive outcomes (p. 39), but also because such hierarchies are wrong in themselves. So, at least for these writers, and at least in relation to any benefits accruing from the mechanism of status inequality, the concern about levelling down won't be as sharp. What we lose in material benefit might be more than made up for by having a society in which we can look each other in the eye as equals.

Second, Goodin acknowledges that pessimism about the prospects of successfully overcoming structural injustice is not to deny that political morality dictates that individuals ought to care about injustice and have a responsibility to take a stand against it, even if futile (p. 198). But if that is right (and I think it is), does this not suggest the behaviour underlying the mechanisms themselves can also to be assessed and potentially criticized from the standpoint of political morality? Just to take a few examples: perhaps it is wrong for me to place disproportionate importance on losing something I already have no matter how I got it (p. 24), to maintain links between advantage and the ascriptive characteristics I share so I can get in on the benefit (p. 25), to intentionally network only with the similarly advantaged and at the exclusion of others (p. 61), or to only use the distributional status quo (no matter whether it is just or not) as the basis of my expectations about future circumstances (p. 115). And so at least in relation to individuals who meaningfully cared about rectifying injustice, perhaps there's reason to have a bit more optimism about the possibility of taking advantage of the mechanisms Goodin identifies while getting rid of the differential advantages they confer (cf. pp. 184-186).

In providing a rich account of both how and why social cooperation works to the greater advantage of some over others, Goodin's book puts forward the challenging conclusion that identifying the background human agency making up structural injustice is not to automatically identify the path to overcoming it. Grappling with such a conclusion, and the larger account of which it is part, will be hugely fruitful to any political theorist or philosopher interested in structural injustice.