From statistics to philosophy. A rejoinder to Ndidi Nwaneri

Ndidi Nwaneri’s response to my “four puzzles” is exactly the sort of intelligent and open philosophical reflection which my original short speech had pathetically failed to trigger and which this expanded written version is hoping to help feed. There is a lot of instructive stuff in her compact piece, no doubt in part because she has thought about these issues far more than I ever did. If you need to choose, do read her piece rather than mine.

With most of what she writes I fully agree, in particular with her central point, namely that specific statistical indicators used to assess gender inequality “might not be an accurate measure of social well-being, particularly when abstracted from social contexts”, and hence that “increased longevity, educational opportunities, political participation and lower rates of incarceration, taken alone or even together, does not necessarily translate to rising gender equality”.

Yet, Ndidi Nwameri says she disagrees with at least some of my conclusions. But she cannot possibly do so. Simply because I offer no conclusions, only puzzles, open questions to which I have no answer, in part because a little reflection suffices (jointly with a modicum of intellectual honesty) to realize that the routine answers, or the politically correct answers are way too simplistic. With the modesty that befits a non-expert in the field, my aim was simply, as Ndidi Nwameri kindly recognizes I did, to “raise some philosophically interesting questions”, and also to suggest that addressing these questions, however far-fetched some of them may seem, is of some importance for real-life policies and struggles.

As I was reflecting on Ndidi Nwameri’s many good points about the relations, factual and normative, between dimensions of gender inequality, I came across the Gender Equality Index developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), an agency funded by the European Union and located in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia (eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/gender-equality-index). This composite index aggregates a number of variables each of which reflects some aspect of gender inequality, for example the male/female gaps in earnings, in rates of participation in the labour market, in proportions of tertiary education graduates, in life expectancy or in parliamentary representation.

The scores of each of the European Union’s 28 member states, both overall and for each of the variables are presented in attractive and user-friendly fashion for three dates between 2005 and 2012. This provides a beautiful summary of a huge amount of data collection and processing and, if aptly publicized, can provide governments with useful guidance and serious incentives to improve their scores. But it also raises the sort of philosophical questions that Ndidi Nwameri and I are struggling with in our respective papers.

Can all of gender inequalities captured by the partial indices be regarded as gender injustices? Can gender inequalities in opposite directions cancel each other? And when constructing the aggregate index, what weights should be given to each of the partial indices? When designing an index that is meant to steer policy, these questions are of crucial importance. No amount of data collection can answer them. If anything can, it must be the sort of philosophical discussion which my paper aimed to trigger and which Ndidi Nwameri’s insightful paper illustrates.