



What Were We Thinking?

The intolerable inequalities we take for granted.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Scialabba's main question in this article is not whether or not our current system is fair or free (he asserts that it is not), but whether "freedom" and "fairness" are appropriate ideals for a society. Do you think they are? If not "freedom" and "fairness," what *should* our ideals be?

2. How do you see the gift economy functioning in your life? What gets lost when the gift economy is subordinated to the goal of profit maximization? If there are losses, what can be done to restore them?

3. According to Scialabba, the idea of "just deserts" rests on two fundamental assumptions: first, that one person's input is hers alone (or can be rewarded as hers alone); and second, that merit can be distinguished from luck (luck, unlike merit, doesn't "deserve" a reward, because it is random and arbitrary). What flaws does Scialabba point out in each of these assumptions? Do you agree or disagree with his assessment? How would you define what a person "deserves," and does that definition fit into our current capitalist economic framework?

4. Scialabba writes, "In a society like ours, where economic resources translate into political resources, economic inequality must result in political inequality." What arguments does he offer to support this claim? Do the close ties between politics and economics in fact require a more democratic economic structure? What would such a structure look like?

5. One common American conception of freedom presents "a model of life as a series of discrete purchases and of citizens as sovereign consumers." What freedoms does this imply? What freedoms does it obscure? How has American history contributed to this definition?

6. What questions do you think our twenty-third century descendents will ask of us? Do you think they will be those that Scialabba poses, or different ones? Do these questions change or shape the way you see society, or your responsibility as a citizen?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Eugene McCarragher, "A Providentialism Without God," April 2021: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/providentialism-without-god>

David Bentley Hart, "Three Cheers for Socialism," March 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/three-cheers-socialism>

Anthony Annett, "The Fallen Idol," January 2022: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/fallen-idol>

George Scialabba, "The Free Banquet," May 2017: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/free-banquet>