Can we overcome the world's many inequalites?

I would have loved to start this essay with a few positive words about how far we have come and that present society is such a modern miracle and we have come incredibly far, socially and politically. And even though this is true to some extent and a lot has changed for the better within the last hundred years, I believe that there is still a long way to go when it comes to overcoming the world's many inequalities: they are still present in every country in this world. Minorities are still struggling against discrimination, fighting for their rights. People are still waging wars, killing for money and power, discriminating and hating others for their beliefs, robbing and stealing from people who have close to nothing, and the list just goes on.

But first things first. What do we mean by "inequality"? First of all, I think there is a fairly big problem with categorizing the term itself. When we speak about overcoming inequalities, what we actually mean is rather overcoming injustice. People are not equal. We are all individuals and that is a good thing. The main problem I see is that people are not treated equally and that they do not have equal chances in their lives because of discrimination due to certain attributes like gender, race, religion and other factors. Another thing that needs to be pointed out is the definition of the word "overcome" in this context. What do we mean by saying we want to overcome inequalities? Would it mean that all inequalities and all injustice is wiped from this earth? A more pessimistic person might say that this is an impossible idea and there is some truth to that, in my opinion. I am pretty certain that most people would agree that war is a terrible thing and yet, there has been war throughout history. Everyone that you might ask would say that war is bad and does no good and still, it has happened throughout history and is still happening today - at least in some parts of the world. War is just one example of inequality or injustice: there are always victims and whenever there is violence towards someone, there is injustice, in my opinion. And violence can have many forms, physically and mentally.

So, the complete extinction of injustice does not seem likely at all, when we look at it in a realistic way. And yet, if only a small percentage of the world's injustice would go away, many people on this planet would be better off and that would be a start, would it not? So if this is the premise, then the goal must be to lower these numbers of war victims, or any victims for that matter, even if numbers of inequality are often just theoretical numbers and injustice itself is difficult to measure at all. Who is to decide if an action is an act of injustice? In modern society, there are judges who do that but still, judging an action is not the same as preventing it, so how can people actually stop treating each other unequally and how can we stop injustice? I think one of the key factors that need to be pointed out here is empathy. If more people were empathetic, there would be less injustice, less inequality on this planet, in my opinion. To actually try

and think how an individual might be feeling in a certain situation could make certain harmful actions or words toward that individual less likely to happen, simply because people could have a better understanding of what it means to walk in each other's shoes. So, I think empathy can prevent injustice, in a way. At the same time, one could argue that empathy can not be taught and that for some people it is just impossible to comprehend other people's misery due to their lack of emotional skills, bad upbringing or some other reason. Anyway, let us assume that education and one's upbringing can be very helpful for developing a certain kind of empathy and morale. But what if you are brought up by people who are without any empathy themselves? For every answer, there appears another question, it seems.

Another issue with understanding this topic of inequality or injustice is that it is a very individual matter. I think that everyone perceives inequality a little bit differently from others, regardless of the question if they are affected or not. The way we see things and how we interpret the world has a lot to do with our own background, our own experience and our understanding of ethics and morale. For me as a white heterosexual, it is clearly impossible to comprehend the struggle that a homosexual person of color might have. But that does not mean that I cannot try to be empathetic and support them in any way I can, even if it is just small things. So one of the barriers we face when trying to overcome inequalities ironically derives from the fact that we are all a bit unequal, not only when it comes to our identity, but also our own perception. Two different people could be confronted with the same situation and both might come to a completely different conclusion: one might say that there is some kind of inequality present and the other might say there is none. So it seems to be even more difficult to overcome inequalities when we cannot seem to identify these in the first place. It seems that our moral, personal and cultural background have a large effect on the way we interpret situations. This would mean that many of the world's inequalities are not even seen or registered by many people - and I don't mean that these people are geographically distant to a situation where there is injustice or inequality - but rather distant in a moral way. A simple example could be the struggle for gay rights in many countries. It is often older people who have had a conservative religious upbringing who simply do not want gay people in their community - which is outrageous because these people never chose their sexuality and they should have the right to an undisturbed life, just like every other person should. The fact that people are still protesting against LGBTQI people shows that we have a long way to go when it comes to accepting others the way they are. And this is just one of the many problems that different people are struggling with every day, around the world. There are so many different kinds of inequality in this world that I find it hard to pick one to begin with or to point one out as an example. But since I have homosexual friends, this is one of the topics that I can relate to the most, I suppose.

When I hear the term inequality, I am certainly thinking about social inequality. Terms like racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of discrimination come to my mind. And as much as I think that we are all the same in certain ways, reality paints a different picture, especially when we look at minorities and marginalized groups of people. And just to be clear: I think that Germany, the country I live in, has a very liberal society, especially when compared to other places in the world. But the fact that there are worse places on earth, with more profound inequalities, does not mean there is no need to start improving what we are still lacking. But what exactly are we lacking? How can we define what needs to be done and even more importantly, how do we make a change?

As I write these words, I recognise the irony of discussing inequalities while being a privileged person that has never had to experience any form of discrimination towards me based on my race, gender or religion. At the same time I think it is especially important that privileged people like me speak up and address these issues and try to support those that are not as privileged as I am. What it comes down to in the end, in my opinion, is that everyone should have the same possibilities in life. In an ideal world, no one should be left behind and no one should be discriminated against. Everybody should try to help each other out, even if it is just in symbolic ways like speaking up and saying that you stand for something like feminism, for instance. I myself made the choice at some point in my life to actively say that I consider myself to be a feminist whenever someone is mocking the topic, or feminists in general. I would be lying if I said that I did not enjoy some mens' confused reactions to this statement, as this still might seem like an odd thing to say, at least according to their confused looks on their faces. But fun and games aside, I really think it is important that more men consider themselves to have feminist views in the sense, that they support the idea of having equal rights and equal chances for men and women, or at least try to understand that it is a good thing to stand up for someone - and that someone might as well be a woman. Trying to understand certain mechanisms of sexism a bit more can actually have a positive effect on society because if you understand how certain mechanisms work, you are more likely to recognise them when they happen in front of you - and recognising an issue is a necessary step to actively get rid of it. I really think that more empathy is necessary, considering the fact that many men seem to feel threatened or at least react hostile to the term "feminism". Certainly, you do not have to agree with everything but at least try to have some sympathy here and there and I think the genders would get along better in general. Also, a little self-reflection has never hurt anyone either.

As already mentioned before, inequalities can sometimes be hard to identify, due to different perceptions, lack of knowledge or personal background. But let us go one step further: what if some inequalities are just in our head? For example the thought that you are not good enough. This is a common thought, yes, but some people are dragged

down by it so much that it manifests in everything they do and, like a self-fulfilling prophecy, they sometimes do not succeed in the things they wish to accomplish. The thought of not having equal chances because of your own (false) perception can make life very hard and I think that it is also very important to overcome these kinds of inequalities. People need to communicate more, support each other and listen to what the people around them have to say. No one deserves to be slowed down by the feeling that they are not good enough and that they cannot keep up. Maybe this is one of the downsides of modern society: while we have so much wealth, knowledge and access to almost everything we can dream of, we still need to keep up. Keep up with the good looks, keep up with work, keep up with seemingly perfect people that are better than us and therefore are not the same. We think that they are normal and that we are not, so we try so hard to become like them. This seems like an inequality made up by ourselves and the fear of not being good enough eventually paralyzes us until we cannot be good at all.

When I look at human history, there are some things that I simply cannot get my head around. The accomplishments that we have made as a society seem to be happening slowly: humans have lived on this earth for so long and still we have everyday inequalities. Still we are fighting like cavemen and even though we have come this far, some people just cannot live a normal life because they are bullied or discriminated against. While it is clearly a good thing that in the last couple of decades a lot has changed for the better, like the right for women to vote, but why did this take so long? Why does it still matter if you are male or female when it comes to earning the same salary? Why is it harder for people with foreign names to get a job than it is for people with "German" names? Why are LGBTQI people still leaving their country, in hope for a normal life? The list of questions could go on and one could argue that humans could have resolved many of these issues by now (considering how much time we have had to do so). But maybe it is not that simple at all - maybe time does not play such a big part in overcoming inequalities as I would like to think - maybe these issues keep coming and once a society solves an issue, another appears. For every country that passes a law that helps to overcome injustice, another country might do the opposite and oppress people. One step forward, one step back - or even worse.

We as human beings should try everything in our power to treat each other with respect, just like we would expect to be treated ourselves. If we try to walk in someone else's shoes now and then, we might become more sensitized and develop a better understanding for each other while at the same time preventing ourselves from doing things that we might regret later on, because we hurt someone. I truly believe that people need to carefully think about their actions and how others might perceive our actions and words. When trying to overcome the world's many inequalities we can only do so much but we have to start somewhere and that is to look at ourselves and the

people around us. It is our closest friends, colleagues and neighbors who are affected by what we do and say everyday, so let us all try to make this life better for everyone around us. Let us not harm each other and let us try to live this life the best we can, because we all have one thing in common: we only have one life. So why not live it in a good way?