You are probably aware that there are high levels of inequality in the world and that inequality is getting worse. But it is unlikely that you appreciate just how unequal things are. So here is a way of visualising it. Take the wealth of the eight richest people on the planet and combine it. Now do the same for the poorest 3.5 billion. The two sums are the same, £350 billion. Correct: just eight people own as much wealth as half of the world's population.

That is just one of many eye-watering measures of inequality. Consider that in the US, almost 85 per cent of the wealth is owned by just 20 per cent of the population, and the bottom 40 per cent own just 0.3 per cent of it. In 1960, a chief executive in the US typically earned 20 times as much as an average worker. Today it is more like 354 times.

Most people find these numbers shocking, even obscene, and inequality has become one of the world's most serious issues. Early in his second term, President Obama called it “the defining challenge of our time”; Pope Francis has described it as “the root of social evil”. The general public also rank it highly. When the Pew Research Center asked people in 44 countries whether they thought the gap between rich and poor was a “big problem”, a majority in all 44 said it was. A majority in 28 said it was a “very big” problem.

The idea that inequality needs to be reduced now almost goes without saying. I agree – but my training as a cognitive scientist warns me we should be careful how we go about it. Some fights for equality, such as against racial prejudice, are morally straightforward. But the battle against economic inequality isn’t so simple.

As surprising as it might seem at first, some economic inequality is actually morally good. I recently explored this issue in the journal *Nature Human Behaviour* with two of my colleagues at Yale, Christina Starmans and Paul Bloom. We concluded that a crucial step in fighting inequality is realising that it is not all bad. If we want to beat inequality, we must first distinguish between the bad sort and the good sort.

Egalitarian to a fault

The dislike of economic inequality supposedly runs deep in human psychology. The trait we call “inequality aversion” emerges early in development and is found across many cultures, from city dwellers in the US to villagers in Peru and Uganda.

Laboratory studies confirm that inequality aversion is a strong motivator of behaviour. For example, when people are asked to divide money among themselves and fellow subjects in experiments, they have a clear preference for equal distribution. This desire for equality is so powerful that people often choose to receive smaller but more equal rewards over larger but more unequal ones, and in other cases prefer surplus resources to be thrown away rather than distributed unequally.

There is, however, a paradox. A separate body of research finds something quite different. When people are asked about the ideal distribution of wealth in their country rather than among a small group of individuals in the lab, they are actually quite relaxed about inequality.

In one influential study, for instance, researchers asked a representative sample of 5500 Americans about their ideal distribution of wealth in the US. On average, people said that the richest 20 per cent should hold 30 per cent of the wealth, and the bottom 20 per cent just 10 per cent. When forced to choose between high levels of inequality and complete equality, most chose the former.

The authors concluded that most Americans desire greater equality, but not to the extent of living in a completely equal society (see “Deep divisions”, page 30). Similar results have been found in many other countries, and in people from all points on the political spectrum.

This body of research casts serious doubt on inequality aversion. In fact, my colleagues and I argue there is no evidence that people are actually bothered by economic inequality.

How can these apparently contradictory findings be reconciled? Is one wrong and the other right? No. We think they are both correct. They can be explained by a dislike not of inequality, but of something that is often confounded with it: economic unfairness.

Equality and fairness seem like the same
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