Within the past forty years there has been a pronounced shift in sociology toward the view that social and economic inequalities are always bad. Since people are all the same in their talents, motivations, and inclinations, if a society fairly distributes its social positions then everyone would end up more or less the same. Society would be highly egalitarian. In earlier years the kind of equality sociologists emphasized was equality of opportunity. But now they take the more extreme position that only equality of outcome is acceptable. Sociologists now attribute unequal outcomes to the power of dominant groups to hold other groups down, or to outright exploitation.

This lecture challenged this argument. It started with the assumption that people are not all the same. There are individual differences in ability, motivation, inclinations, and so on. When there is open competition for social positions in modern societies, those with greater talent and motivation will end up in higher positions than those with less talent and motivation. François Nielsen has shown that there is a very strong genetic component to intelligence, high school grades,
and high school students' college plans. In the long course of social evolution, egalitarian societies have become increasingly unequal all over the world; the opposite trend — from inequality to equality — has never been observed, except to some extent in modern industrial societies. But they are unique and inequalities are still very large.

It was also argued that inequality is not always bad. In modern capitalist societies, rich capitalists invest their capital to make profits, but such investment has led over the past 150 years to enormous affluence for the vast majority of the population. We should not resent the rich because, in general, they make the rest of us much better off than we would be otherwise. John Rawls argued that inequalities are justified if they make those at the bottom of society better off. It was argued that modern capitalist society has done exactly that.

Because of the biological nature of humans, unequal outcomes are inevitable in any large-scale society. Sociology needs to develop a more realistic view of how inequality originates and what its consequences are.