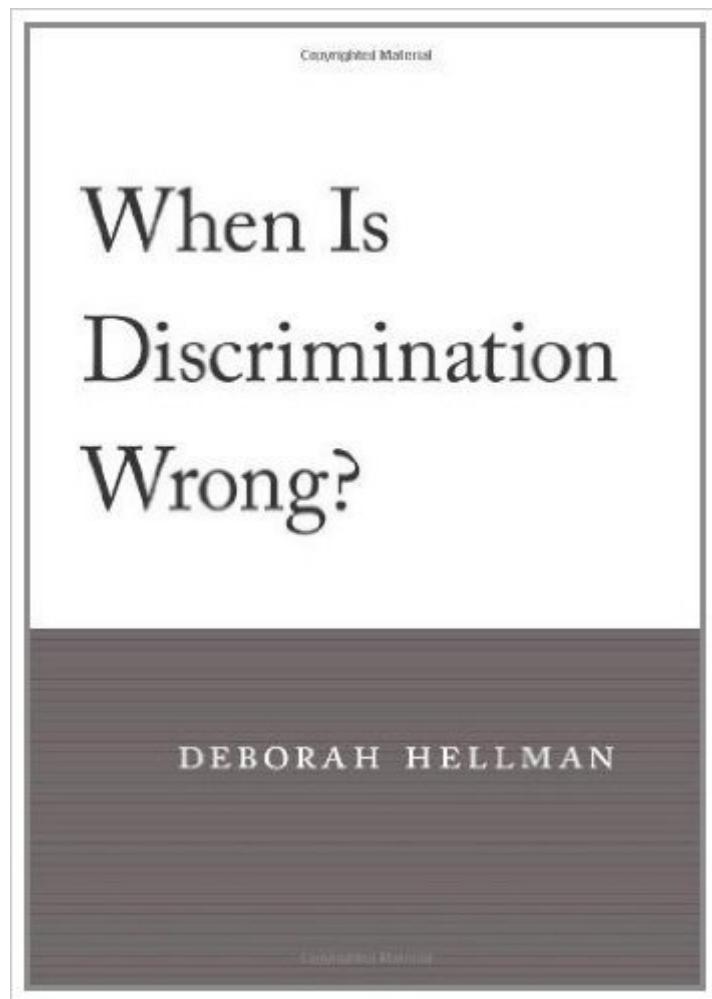


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When Is Discrimination Wrong?



Synopsis

A law requires black bus passengers to sit in the back of the bus. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration approves a drug for use by black heart failure patients. A state refuses to license drivers under age 16. A company avoids hiring women between the ages of 20 and 40. We routinely draw distinctions among people on the basis of characteristics that they possess or lack. While some distinctions are benign, many are morally troubling. In this boldly conceived book, Deborah Hellman develops a much-needed general theory of discrimination. She demonstrates that many familiar ideas about when discrimination is wrong—“when it is motivated by prejudice, grounded in stereotypes, or simply departs from merit-based decision-making”—won’t adequately explain our widely shared intuitions. Hellman argues that, in the end, distinguishing among people on the basis of traits is wrong when it demeans any of the people affected. She deftly explores the question of how we determine what is in fact demeaning. Claims of wrongful discrimination are among the most common moral claims asserted in public and private life. Yet the roots of these claims are often left unanalyzed. *When Is Discrimination Wrong?* explores what it means to treat people as equals and thus takes up a central problem of democracy.

Book Information

File Size: 1362 KB

Print Length: 221 pages

Page Numbers Source ISBN: 0674027973

Publisher: Harvard University Press (May 30, 2008)

Publication Date: May 30, 2008

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B001GS75US

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Not Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #813,281 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #37

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Customer Reviews

"Isn't discrimination always wrong?" That's what people say when they see the deliberately provocative title of this book. Of course in reality the issue isn't so simple. Is it wrong for the FDA to approve a particular drug for African Americans specifically if it addresses a health problems of that population? Is it wrongful discrimination for a nursing home for women to only hire women as attendants? Most of us know wrongful discrimination when we see it: separate but equal; blacks forced to sit at the back of the bus; ethnic quotas on immigration; glass ceilings, etc... But what is it precisely that makes wrongful discrimination wrong? How does that apply to the vague and thorny gray areas where all the trouble lies? Deborah Hellman does a terrific job of framing the problem, summarizing existing scholarship and legal theory on the subject, and then coming to her own conclusions. She very clearly puts each theoretical argument in its place and then draws an all encompassing frame around them - a bedrock principle that cuts to the heart of the issue and neatly addresses its core. She states it clearly at the conclusion of Chapter 1: "Discrimination is wrong when it demeans. To demean is to treat another as less worthy." She spends the rest of the book precisely defining her terms (for example membership in a stigmatized group matters) and carefully examining alternatives and counter arguments. By bringing everything back to a simple moral principle her work feels in spirit akin to those of the framers of the constitution. It's that kind of clear and powerful thinking: reduction to first principles; simple truths that we hold to be self evident. Hellman's analysis is deep.

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