1. Introduction

Last lecture, we considered two prominent interpretations of equality of opportunity: meritocracy, and fair equality of opportunity. This lecture examines a third and final interpretation of equality of opportunity, frequently called Luck Egalitarianism, before turning to arguments for general scepticism about equality of opportunity. Before turning to this, let’s recall some of the key takeaways of the first lecture.

We started by looking at Meritocracy, or ‘Careers Open to Talents’. Meritocracy says that desirable jobs or positions should be offered to the best-qualified applicants through competitions that no one is excluded from entering. A qualification is an ability or disposition which contributes positively to performing the task involved in the relevant position. Meritocracy is a highly influential interpretation of equality of opportunity in public discourse. But we also saw that, in important respects, it seems unfair if it is taken alone: if some people don’t have an adequate opportunity to access qualifications—for instance, because they come from poorer social backgrounds—then selecting the best qualified candidates seems unfair.

Fair Equality of Opportunity (FEO), which is most famously defended by John Rawls, tries to remedy this problem by adding to the principle Meritocracy another principle. Fair Background, which says that access to qualifications should not be influenced by individuals’ socioeconomic background. When you put this together with Meritocracy, the upshot is that those who have the same level of natural talent and ability, and the same disposition to use them, have the same prospects of getting the job. However, although this theory is called “fair” equality of opportunity, we saw that it too might potentially seem unfair. FEO allows differences in natural talent to influence opportunities to get jobs. But what natural talent one is born with seems “morally arbitrary”: it is just as contingent and undeserved as what social background one is born into. So if you think that it is unfair to let undeserved inequalities in social background influence opportunities to access jobs and positions, then you may think that undeserved inequalities in natural talent should not be allowed to influence opportunities to access jobs and positions. In summary, FEO may seem unfair because those who are born untalented aren’t given an equal opportunity to get jobs—even though they are untalented through no fault of their own.

This criticism is often what motivates a switch to the last theory of equality of opportunity we will consider: Luck Egalitarianism.

2. Luck Egalitarianism

The basic idea of Luck Egalitarianism is that features of people’s lives that they are not responsible for, that they have not chosen, should not influence their opportunity to lead good lives. See, for example: Ronald Dworkin 1977 ‘What is Equality? Parts 1 and 2’; Richard Arneson 1989 ‘Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare’; G.A. Cohen 1989 ‘On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice’; Shlomi Segall 2012 ‘Should the Best Qualified be
Appointed? In other words, this view says that we should redress inequalities if and only if they result from luck, rather than from choices people are responsible for. This is why it is called Luck Egalitarianism.

More specifically, then, Luck Egalitarians propose to broaden the idea of equality of opportunity in two ways. First, it says that we should eliminate unequal opportunities resulting from unchosen differences in social background as well as unequal opportunities resulting from unchosen differences in natural talent. Since being born with no natural talent is just as unlucky and unchosen as being born with socioeconomic disadvantages, it shouldn’t influence one’s opportunities. In this way, Luck Egalitarianism is more demanding than FEO.

The second way in which Luck Egalitarianism is broader than the theories of equality of opportunity we saw in the first lecture is that it focuses not just on jobs and social positions. The theories we saw last week focus exclusively on opportunities to acquire desirable jobs and social positions. Luck Egalitarians think there is no good reason for this narrow focus. In particular, Richard Arneson (1989, ‘Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare’) argues that what really matters, what we really care about, is human well-being or welfare. Jobs and social positions are one source of well-being, but they are not the only source. Wealth, leisure, good health can also be sources of well-being, and you could in principle have them without having a job. Since jobs and social positions are not special, Luck Egalitarians think that equality of opportunity should not focus simply on opportunities for jobs and positions. Instead, for Arneson, we should focus on opportunities for welfare.

In summary, Luck Egalitarianism tells us that we should redress inequalities in welfare when they result from luck, and allow them when they result from choices people are responsible for. Luck Egalitarianism sometimes goes by other names. It is sometimes referred to as Responsibility-Sensitive Egalitarianism—because it cares about removing inequalities that don’t result from responsible choice. And it's also sometimes referred to as “Equality of Opportunity for Welfare”, because as we’ve just seen, it does not just focus on jobs or social positions. Instead, its aim is to make sure that each person has a range of options that is equivalent to every others persons' in terms of its prospects for welfare. Note that I’m simplifying somewhat here. Some Luck Egalitarians agree that we shouldn’t focus narrowly jobs or social positions, but disagree that we should focus on welfare. Dworkin (1977, ‘What is Equality? Part 2’), for example, thinks that we should strive for equality of opportunities for resources: this is broader than jobs or social positions, but different from welfare. I won’t be going into these complications here, and I’ll be focusing—with Arneson—on equality of opportunity for welfare.

3. Considerations For Luck Egalitarianism

Luck Egalitarianism may seem appealing because it is the version of equality of opportunity that most fully and coherently captures two important intuitions about fairness.

1) It captures the intuition that it is unfair for people to be disadvantaged through no fault of their own. As we’ve seen, it does so more consistently than Fair Equality of Opportunity (FEO), since FEO allows unchosen natural abilities to influence one’s opportunities.
2) It captures the intuition that fairness requires that people be held accountable for their choices. Recall that Luck Egalitarianism says that we should eliminate inequalities if *and only if* they result from bad luck. This means that if one has less welfare than others as a result of deliberate choices that one has made—rather than as a result of bad luck—Luck Egalitarianism says that we shouldn’t undo these losses of welfare. This idea that people should be held responsible for their choices has widespread appeal, and it is often held as a criticism of equality of outcome that it is insensitive to the choices people make.

### 4. Considerations Against Luck Egalitarianism

**a) Liberty**

The first worry you might have with Luck Egalitarianism concerns liberty. In Lecture 1, we saw that nullifying the influence of social background on opportunities for jobs and positions (as FEO demands) will require extensive state interference with private life. It may, for example, require abolishing the family. This may seem problematic from the standpoint of individual liberty. But Luck Egalitarianism goes *even further* than FEO. It requires not just nullifying the effect of social background on opportunities, but also nullifying the effect of unchosen differences in natural talent. So if you thought that FEO was bad from the standpoint of liberty, you may have even greater worries in the case of Luck Egalitarianism.

Luck Egalitarians might reply that this isn’t as bad as it initially sounds. They *aren’t* suggesting that we should remove or take away people’s talents and abilities when these are undeserved, or transfer them to those who lack natural abilities and talents. For example, Luck Egalitarians wouldn’t require having people with perfect sight transfer one of their eyes to those who are blind. Instead, they may simply demand that we compensate those who lack natural abilities by means of financial redistribution. That is, Luck Egalitarianism may require imposing a redistributive tax from the naturally talented to those who are untalented. Still, you might think that this is an excessive restriction of liberty for those who are born talented: it might perhaps force the naturally talented to work for the untalented most of the time.

Luck Egalitarians might give another reply. They might say: ‘Yes, imposing significant taxes on people who are naturally skilled will reduce their liberty. But at the same time, it will *enhance* the liberty of people who lacked natural abilities and who receive financial compensation. Indeed, financial compensation gives them resources that are needed for them to pursue their aims and goals.’ So it may be that the restriction of liberty involved in implementing Luck Egalitarians could be outweighed by other gains in liberty.

**b) Efficiency**

Luck Egalitarianism might also seem to be inefficient. The first problem is that Luck Egalitarianism might dis incentivise the talented from working hard or applying for socially important jobs. As we’ve just seen, Luck Egalitarians often say that, to equalize opportunities for welfare, there should be redistributive taxation from the naturally talented to those who are untalented. But if important jobs or social positions come with very little pay after taxation, those who are talented or qualified may no longer want to occupy them. As a result, important social functions might not be performed very well. You might not get the best
engineers building bridges, the best surgeons operating, and so on. Overall, this inefficiency could end up making everyone worse off.

There’s another reason why Luck Egalitarianism might require giving unqualified people jobs, and thereby creating inefficient outcomes. So far I’ve suggested that Luck Egalitarianism would improve the opportunities for welfare of the untalented by compensating them financially. But Cynthia Stark (2013, ‘Luck, Opportunity, and Disability’) suggests that there may be some things that are crucial to well-being that you can’t get through financial compensation. For instance, having a decent or prestigious job or social position may be necessary for basic self-respect and dignity. If so, then Luck Egalitarianism may require giving people who are very untalented and unqualified important jobs and social positions.

In response to this objection, G.A. Cohen (2008, Rescuing Justice and Equality, ch. 2), suggests that Luck Egalitarians could simply impose an efficiency constraint on the pursuit of equality of opportunity. On this view, we try to equalize opportunities for welfare only when equalizing opportunities will not make everyone worse off or no one better off. The problem with this reply is that it involves appealing to a principle external to equality of opportunity. So it concedes that we should limit the importance of equality of opportunity in light of other values—namely efficiency. By contrast, the other theories of equality of opportunity seemed easier to reconcile with efficiency: although meritocracy and efficiency sometimes come apart (as we saw in the first lecture), meritocracy requires selecting the best qualified candidates to perform tasks. So in many cases, it facilitates the performance of important social goals.

c) Epistemic difficulties

Another important problem that Luck Egalitarianism encounters concerns its implementation. Implementing Luck Egalitarianism seems extremely difficult, epistemically. In other words, you might think that implementing Luck Egalitarianism requires us to have impossible amounts of knowledge. To find out who should receive compensation and who shouldn’t according to Luck Egalitarianism, we need to determine:

1) what their current levels of well-being are: this involves figuring out what their socioeconomic situation is; what qualifications and skills they have, and so on.
2) whether their current level of well-being results from choice or from luck. To do this (a) we need to have a sense of what their starting point was—what their social background is, what original or innate talents they had. And (b) we’ll need to determine which actions they took over the course of their lives were genuine choices for which they can be held responsible. This last issue quickly gets us into metaphysical debates about free will and determinism. Indeed, we might need to find out whether our actions are determined or not; and if they are, how far this undermines our capacity for free choice and our responsibility. As G.A. Cohen (1989: 934) acknowledges, Luck Egalitarians “may indeed be up to [their] necks in the free will problem”.

In summary, then: because its policy implications are difficult to determine, Luck Egalitarianism may be limited in its capacity to guide action. Compare this with meritocracy. It too generates epistemic difficulties, but these are arguably smaller. You just need to determine how skilled and talented individuals currently are. But unlike Luck Egalitarianism,
you don’t need to figure out what levels of talent or wealth individuals had when they were born; and you don’t need to find out whether the things that have happened to them since their birth were result of free choice or of bad luck.

Now, it is worth emphasizing why the epistemic difficulties of Luck Egalitarianism are a problem. One purpose of an ethical ideal like equality of opportunity is to help us find out what the best state of affairs is. But that’s not the only purpose of an ethical ideal. We also want ethical ideals to guide our decisions in the real world. This is especially true with equality of opportunity. As we discussed in the first lecture, the idea of equality of opportunity is quite influential in public policy-making. So it would be desirable if the interpretation of equality of opportunity we ended up with had relatively clear policy upshots. It’s not clear that Luck Egalitarianism does. It tells us in broad terms what a just and fair society would be like. But it seems to tell us little about how we ought to get there. For many policies, it’s unclear whether or not they bring us closer or further away from the ideal.

d) Equality

We’ve considered objections suggesting that Luck Egalitarianism gives too much weight to equality, and therefore jeopardizes values like liberty or efficiency. And we’ve seen an objection that says that Luck Egalitarianism is hard to implement. A final objection suggests that Luck Egalitarianism is not egalitarian enough. This objection comes from Elizabeth Anderson, in one of the most philosophical famous papers of the last twenty years: ‘What is the Point of Equality?’ Anderson raises many objections to Luck Egalitarianism there, but the one I’ll consider here is sometimes referred to as the ‘abandonment objection’. Luck Egalitarianism, remember, says that we should allow inequalities when they result from genuine choice rather than bad luck.

Consider some implications. Imagine that a motorcyclist chooses not to wear a helmet because they enjoy the feeling of the wind blowing in their hair. And suppose they have an accident where they sustain a head injury that could have been avoided had they worn a helmet. Suppose also that they no money to pay for hospital bills. Luck Egalitarianism, it might seem, says that since their injury results from their choice, they should not be treated for their injury.

Or imagine that someone’s parent becomes ill. So they quit their job to care for their parent. As a result, they end up in a situation of dire poverty. But the situation of poverty they find themselves in results from their choice. Luck Egalitarianism once more suggests—at least on the face of it—that they should not be compensated for their poverty.

Intuitively, Anderson suggests, these implications of Luck Egalitarianism are wrong. We should treat the motorcyclist, and we should not leave the carer in a situation of dire poverty. So Luck Egalitarianism is not egalitarian enough in virtue of abandoning those who make choices which result in their disadvantage.

In response, what could Luck Egalitarians say? One option Arneson (2000, ‘Luck Egalitarianism and Prioritarianism’) suggests is that there should be laws preventing people from making bad choices. For instance, laws requiring people to wear helmets even if they don’t want to. If such laws are in place, Luck Egalitarianism won’t have to abandon people.
You may nonetheless still have some concerns with this response:

(a) first, you may think it is objectionably paternalistic: it interferes with people’s choices by suggesting that they don’t know what is good for them.

(b) second, it doesn’t really help in the case of the carer: choosing to quit one’s job to care for others doesn’t seem to be a bad choice, and it certainly shouldn’t be made illegal.

5. Scepticism about Equality of Opportunity

We’ve now considered three theories of equality of opportunity: meritocracy, fair equality of opportunity, and Luck Egalitarianism. Each, as we have seen, encounters pretty significant difficulties. As a result, you might come to be sceptical of the ideal of equality of opportunity generally. So, in the rest of this lecture, I’m going to introduce two critical arguments which are intended to apply to equality of opportunity more generally, rather than simply to certain interpretations of this idea.

a) A General Dilemma?

The first, which comes from Clare Chambers (2009, ‘Each Outcome is Another Opportunity’), strings together some of the substantive worries we have already come across. Chambers argues that theories of equality of opportunity encounter a general dilemma: either they are ethically inconsistent, or they are unrealisable. The argument goes roughly like this. Equality of opportunity says that we should equalize opportunities for certain kinds of benefits—either jobs and social positions, or welfare. Now, Chambers notes that there are two ways of conceiving of the process of equalizing opportunities.

On the first conception, equality of opportunity involves a single “Moment of Equal Opportunity”: a moment or time in people’s lives where we make sure they have equal opportunities. After that Moment of Equal Opportunity, if inequalities arise—including inequalities in opportunity—we no longer remedy them. On this view, the ideal of equality of opportunity views life as a kind of race. The point of equality of opportunity is to make sure that everyone is level when the race begins, but it does not correct inequalities that occur after this. Typically, the idea might be that we make sure people have equal opportunities for jobs or for social positions when they turn 18 and apply for university.

But Chambers thinks this understanding of equality of opportunity is ethically inconsistent. To illustrate her point, she gives the following thought experiment. Jason and Jeremy are both 18 and have similar backgrounds, educations, native talent, effort and inclination. We might say that their prospects for success are equal. They then apply to university and Jeremy is accepted at a slightly better university than Jason. When applying for jobs three years later, Jeremy then gets a better job than Jason—in part because his university gave him slightly better qualifications. As such, in his new job, Jeremy gets more important clients, better training, and so on, than Jason. By the time they apply for their second jobs, Jeremy has become a far better candidate. And this goes on for their entire lives, with the gap widening ever more. The general point is this: Although they start out with equal opportunities for success in the first competition, winning the first competition gives Jeremy greater prospects for success in the second competition; and this in turn gives Jeremy still greater prospects in the third competition, and so on.
Now, if equality of opportunity is interpreted as involving a Moment of Equal Opportunity, these ever-widening inequalities are completely acceptable. After all, Jason and Jeremy had a moment of equal opportunity when they were 18. But Chambers thinks that there's something inconsistent about this view. If there was a good moral reason to equalize the opportunities between Jason and Jeremy when they were 18, then it seems unclear why those moral reasons shouldn’t also apply afterwards, when Jeremy has accumulated far more opportunities. In other words: when they start applying for their second, third, and fourth jobs, Jeremy has far more opportunities than Jason does. So if inequality of opportunity is bad, why shouldn’t we equalize opportunities then too? In summary: if we interpret equality of opportunity as involving a Moment of Equal Opportunity, it might seem to involve a strange ethical inconsistency.

Alternatively, then, perhaps we should interpret equal opportunity differently. It is not something we achieve at a single moment, but something we are trying to achieve throughout individuals’ lives. So, on this view, we need to constantly try to rectify inequalities of opportunity between people. But the problem, Chambers thinks, is that this second view is infeasible:

1) it faces familiar epistemic difficulties—we need to keep track over the course of people’s lives of how many opportunities they have, and of who needs to be given more opportunities.
2) it also faces familiar efficiency problems. Go back to the moment where Jeremy and Jason have finished university and Jeremy now has greater opportunities for success than Jason. When they apply for a job, we may have to give Jason the job instead of Jeremy even though Jason is less qualified. This is because that way Jason will get more training and experience, and this will equalize opportunities between him and Jeremy.

The upshot is that we have a general dilemma: if equality of opportunity involves a single Moment of Equal Opportunity, it is ethically inconsistent; and if it does not, then it seems unrealizable.

How can we challenge this dilemma? The defender of equality of opportunity might attack the first horn of the dilemma. They might say that there is a good reason why after the Moment of Equal of Opportunity we do not need to redress inequalities of opportunity. The reason is that since the candidates had equal opportunities at the Moment of Equal Opportunity, the inequalities that occur afterwards are not unfair. They result not from bad luck, but from choices candidates made not to avail themselves of the equal opportunities they had. Jason and Jeremy both had equal opportunities to succeed in their university applications, but only Jeremy availed himself of them. Perhaps Jeremy simply studied harder and Jason spent more time watching television. So there is no ethical inconsistency: we redress inequalities before the Moment of Equal Opportunity insofar as these were due to bad luck. Afterwards, we do not do this, because inequalities necessarily result from choice.

One worry you might have with this response is that it puts a lot of weight on our ability to create a true Moment of Equal Opportunity (MEO), where Jeremy and Jason have exactly the same prospects for success. If we can’t make sure that Jason and Jeremy start with truly equal opportunities, then it’s not true that the inequalities which arise later on are fair and deserved. So, even on the MEO approach, a lot depends on what is practically feasible.
If you’re interested in answering this dilemma, one further thing you may want to think about (and which Chambers discusses more in the paper) is how the dilemma applies to the different theories of equality of opportunity we have seen: meritocracy, FEO, and Luck Egalitarianism. It may turn out—or it may not—that some theories of equality of opportunity are less vulnerable to the dilemma. For instance, it may turn out that some of these theories are easier to apply continuously, throughout people’s lives.

b) A Useless Label?

I now want to mention, much more briefly, a final challenge to equality of opportunity, which comes from Janet Radcliffe Richards (‘Equality of Opportunity’), and which takes a different form. This challenge is less about the ethical appeal of equality of opportunity, and more about whether it is a useful label at all. According to Radcliffe Richards, the many competing interpretations of equality of opportunity, including ones we have considered in these two lectures, actually don’t have much in common with one another: they instantiate different substantive values and are often even different kinds of principles. Because these interpretations of equality of opportunity are so different from one another, they are not fruitfully thought of under the same umbrella—therefore, Radcliffe Richards thinks we should dispense with the notion of equality of opportunity.

Now, I’m not going to go into this argument in great detail here. But it’s worth thinking about whether Radcliffe Richards’s objection makes sense in light of what we’ve seen in this lecture and the last. On the one hand, it seems as though there is a value that the three ideals of equality of opportunity we’ve considered all seem related to: namely, fairness. For each of meritocracy, FEO, and Luck Egalitarianism, we’ve seen that some advocates think that they are justified because they realize fairness. So there seems to be more unity in equality of opportunity than Radcliffe Richards thinks there is.

At the same time, it’s true that there are some important discontinuities. Probably the most significant is the fact that Luck Egalitarianism is not primarily concerned with the distribution of jobs and social positions. Remember: it cares about opportunity for welfare—which is a broader notion. That might make you wonder whether Luck Egalitarianism is simply a principle that has a different focus—and if so, whether it really makes sense to think of it as a competitor to meritocracy and FEO. If you’re interested in this question, I highly recommend that you look at Andrew Mason’s paper ‘Equality of Opportunity: Old and New’, where he closely investigates the relation between these different principles; and whether they should be seen as competitors, or as mutually complementary.