

EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

IA Ethics and Political Philosophy
Lent term 2018

A Popular Principle

We won't be ashamed of saying: we want an inclusive society with equality of opportunity for all.

— Jeremy Corbyn (2016)

Our Party is the Party of equality of opportunity.

— Margaret Thatcher (1975)

Plan of the lecture series

- **Week 5:** Varieties of Equality of Opportunity
- **Week 6:** Varieties of Equality of Opportunity
- **Week 7:** Discrimination
- **Week 8:** Affirmative Action

EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY I: MERITOCRACY

Defining Meritocracy

- Other name: “Careers Open to Talents” (Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*)
- Proponents: David Miller (‘Deserving Jobs’), George Sher (‘Qualifications, Fairness, and Desert’)
- Meritocracy: Desirable jobs or positions should be offered to the best-qualified applicants through competitions that no one is excluded from entering.
- Qualification: A qualification for a position X is an ability or disposition that contributes positively to performing the task involved in position X.
- Focus of meritocracy: jobs and social positions

Meritocracy's Appeal

“[X] is an **equal opportunity employer**. [...] Our selection criteria and procedures are frequently reviewed to ensure that individuals are selected, promoted and treated **on the basis of their relevant merits and abilities**”

Justification I: Efficiency

- The efficiency argument: Giving jobs and positions to the best qualified means that each job ends up being performed by those who are most capable of performing them.
- This is a forward-looking justification.
- Problem: forward-looking or consequentialist justifications sometimes recommend hiring people who are **not** the best qualified, against what meritocracy demands.
- Example: John and his wealthy father versus Jane the expert mechanic

Justification II: Rewarding Past Performance

- The past-performance argument: Hiring the best qualified is a way of rewarding people for their past performance.
- This is a backward -looking justification.
- Problem: it is possible to be the best qualified for a certain job without having performed the job well in the past (Miller, 'Deserving Jobs')
- Example: Paul the diligent surgeon versus Sarah the gifted surgeon.

Justification III: Respect for Agency

- The respect argument: “When we hire by merit, we abstract from all facts about the applicants except their ability to perform well at the relevant tasks. By thus concentrating on their ability to perform, we treat them as agents whose purposeful acts are capable of making a difference in the world.” (Sher, ‘Qualification, Fairness and Desert,’ p. 119-120; see also Mason).
- Problem 1: Is selecting according to qualifications the only way of respecting agents? What about selecting according to need?
- Problem 2: The idea of respect may be too vague or formal to do any substantive ethical work here (Arneson)

Justification IV: Desert and fairness

- The fairness argument (David Miller):
 - (1) Fairness requires that people be given what they deserve.
 - (2) People deserve to be rewarded in a way that is proportional to the valuable contributions they make.
 - (3) The best qualified would make the highest positive contributions to the job-giving institution if they were given the job.
 - (4) So the best qualified is the person most likely to deserve the benefits involved in the job (from (2) and (3)).
 - (5) Because the best qualified will be more deserving of the job's benefit or salary, fairness requires giving them the job (from (1) and (4)).

Justification IV: Desert and fairness

- The fairness argument (David Miller):
 - (2) People deserve to be rewarded in a way that is proportional to the valuable contributions they make.
- Problem: How much someone can contribute depends on their qualifications. But often, people don't deserve their qualifications.

So: Premise (2) seems false—if someone's qualifications are undeserved, they do not deserve to be rewarded for what they contribute thanks to those qualifications.

Objection: The Unfairness of Meritocracy

- The Unfairness Objection (Bernard Williams, John Rawls):
In societies with significant social inequalities, people start out with unequal opportunities to acquire qualifications.
So, in such societies, it seems unfair to reward people on the basis of their qualifications, as meritocracy does.
- Example: Bernard Williams's The Warrior Class Case

EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY II:
FAIR EQUALITY
OF OPPORTUNITY (FEO)

Defining Fair Equality of Opportunity (FEO)

- Fair Equality of Opportunity combines two principles (Rawls):
 - (1) Meritocracy: Desirable jobs or positions should be offered to the best-qualified applicants through competitions that no one is excluded from entering.
 - (2) Fair Background: Access to qualifications should not be influenced by individuals' socioeconomic background.
- The upshot of FEO: “Those with the same level of [natural] talent and ability, and the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system” (Rawls, *Theory of Justice*)

FEO: Some Observations

- Benefits of FEO:
 - (a) It gives an important role to qualifications in the selection of candidates (like meritocracy).
 - (b) It seems fairer than meritocracy, because it tries to nullify the influence of undeserved social inequalities on access to qualifications.
- Possible policy recommendations: Public funding for schooling, redistributive taxation.
- The Issue of Priority: Which should take priority in FEO— Meritocracy, or Fair Background?

The Family Objection

- What family one is born into strongly affects to what extent one develops qualifications.
- So FEO may demand extreme regulation of the family, or even abolishing the family. This may seem like an unacceptable interference with individual liberty.
- Possible answer: we should welcome this scepticism about the family (Plato; some strands of feminist philosophy)

The Unfairness Objection (Revisited)

- The Unfairness Objection: The influence of natural talent. FEO allows natural talent to influence the distribution of qualifications, as well as jobs and social positions. But natural talent seems just as undeserved as social background.
- Answer 1. Complement FEO with a different principle (Rawls)
- Answer 2. Argue that there is a morally significant difference between background natural inequalities and background social inequalities.
- Answer 3. Abandon FEO in favour of a fairer theory of equality of opportunity (next week).

Thank you!