The Value of Equality and Egalitarianism

Lecture 3
Why not luck egalitarianism?

§1. Luck and equality

T1 ‘…my own animating conviction in political philosophy with respect to justice is a conviction about distributive justice in particular… It is that an unequal distribution, whose inequality cannot be vindicated by some choice or fault or desert on the part of (some of) the relevant affected agents… is unfair, and, therefore, pro tanto, unjust, and nothing can remove that particular injustice.’

(G.A. Cohen, Rescuing Justice and Equality, p.7)

T2 ‘…the intuitive idea that [luck egalitarians] all share… is that persons should not be disadvantaged or advantaged simply on account of good or bad luck.’

(Kok-Chor Tan, Defense of Luck Egalitarianism, p.665)

Luck egalitarianism

It is unjust if one person has a smaller distributive share than another just as a result of brute luck… not as a result of the choices that they made and for which they can held responsible…

P1 It is unjust if people are rewarded/punished for things that they did not choose.

P2 People do not choose to have a particular skin colour, gender, socio-economic background, level of talent, etc.

C It is unjust if people are rewarded/punished for having a particular skin colour, gender, socio-economic background, level of talent, etc.

Is the guiding idea of luck egalitarianism just that people’s distributive shares shouldn’t be influenced by luck…? Suppose we had equal distributive shares because of our skin colour, gender, socio-economic background, etc. Would this be unjust…?

Cf. Susan Hurley on the egalitarian fallacy.

T3 ‘…in any ordinary sense of “voluntary,” people’s voluntary choices are routinely influenced by unchosen features of their personalities, temperaments, and the social contexts in which they find themselves…’
(Samuel Scheffler, *What is Egalitarianism?, p.18*)

T4 ‘…we may indeed be up to our necks in the free will problem, but that is just tough luck… It is not a reason for not following the argument where it goes.’

(Jerry Cohen, *Currency of Egalitarian Justice, p.934*)

T5 ‘We are not looking for an absolute distinction between presence and absence of genuine choice… The amount of genuineness is a matter of degree, and egalitarian redress is indicated to the extent that a disadvantage does not reflect genuine choice… That extent is a function of several things, and there is no aspect of a person’s situation which is wholly due to genuine choice.’

(Jerry Cohen, *Currency of Egalitarian Justice, p.934*)

What is the objection…?

There is no advantage/disadvantage that is wholly the result of choice as opposed to circumstance…

There is no advantage/disadvantage that is even partly the result of choice as opposed to circumstance…

§2. Victims of bad option luck

*The abandonment of negligent victims…*

P1 If luck egalitarianism is true, then it is morally permissible for the paramedics not to save the uninsured driver.

P2 It is morally impermissible for the paramedics not to save the uninsured driver.

C Luck egalitarianism is false.

Why accept P1…?

P1 If luck egalitarianism is true, then the uninsured driver has no claim of justice to be saved by the paramedics.

P2 If the uninsured driver has no claim of justice to be saved by the paramedics, then it is morally permissible for the paramedics not to save the uninsured driver.

C If luck egalitarianism is true, then it is morally permissible for the paramedics not to save the uninsured driver.

T6 ‘If the faulty driver survives [the accident] but is disabled as a result, society has no obligation to accommodate his disability… It follows that the post office must let the guide dogs of the congenitally blind guide their owners
through the building… but it can with justice turn away the guide dogs of faulty drivers who lost their sight in a car accident.’

(Elizabeth Anderson, What is the Point of Equality?, p.296)

**Discrimination amongst the disabled**

P1 It is always unjust if one blind person is permitted to bring guide dogs into the post office while another is not.

P2 If luck egalitarianism is true then it is not always unjust if one blind person is permitted to bring guide dogs into the post office while another is not.

C Luck egalitarianism is false.

§3. **Victims of bad brute luck**

T7 ‘…equality of fortune [aka luck egalitarianism] fails the most fundamental test any egalitarian theory must meet… that its principles express equal respect and concern for all citizens.’

(Elizabeth Anderson, What is the Point of Equality?, p.289)

T8 ‘To the stupid and untalented: …Because… you were so poorly endowed with talents, we productive ones will… let you share in the bounty of what we have produced with our vastly superior and highly valued abilities… To the ugly and socially awkward: How sad that you are so repulsive to people around you that no one wants to be your friend or lifetime companion… you can console yourself in your miserable loneliness by consuming these material goods that we, the beautiful and charming ones, will provide.’

(Elizabeth Anderson, What is the Point of Equality?, p.305)

T9 ‘…equality of fortune bases its distributive principles on considerations that can only express pity for its supposed beneficiaries… People lay claim to the resources of egalitarian redistribution in virtue of their inferiority… To base rewards on considerations of pity is to fail to… express equal respect for all citizens…’

(Elizabeth Anderson, What is the Point of Equality, p.306)

P1 You cannot treat stupid/untalented people with equal respect and concern if you treat being stupid/untalented as an unfortunate position/a bit of bad luck.

P2 If you’re a luck egalitarian, then you must treat being stupid/untalented as an unfortunate position/a bit of bad luck.

C If you’re a luck egalitarian, then you cannot treat stupid/untalented people with equal respect and concern.
§4. Democratic equality

T10 ‘The proper negative aim of egalitarian justice is not to eliminate the impact of brute luck from human affairs, but to end oppression… Its proper positive aim is not to ensure that everyone gets what they morally deserve… but to create a community in which people stand in relations of equality to others.’

(Elizabeth Anderson, What is the Point of Equality?, p.288-289)

What is oppression?

T11 ‘…forms of social relationship by which some people dominate, exploit, marginalize, demean, and inflict violence upon others.’

(Elizabeth Anderson, What is the Point of Equality?, p.313)

Suppose I agree that we should eliminate domination and prevent exploitation…
Suppose I agree that I should ensure that people are included in collective-decision making and that they are not demeaned… Is it obvious that I value equality…?

T12 ‘…egalitarians… seek to live together in a democratic community…
Democracy is here understood as collective self-determination by means of open discussion among equals, in accordance with rules acceptable to all.’

(Elizabeth Anderson, What is the Point of Equality, p.313)

References