The Value of Equality and Egalitarianism

Lecture 2
Brute luck and equality of opportunity

§1. Sufficiency

T1 ‘With respect to the distribution of economic assets, what is important from the point of view of morality is not that everyone should have the same... but that each should have enough.’

(Harry Frankfurt, *Equality as a Moral Ideal*, p.134)

T2 ‘...absolute priority is to be given to benefits to those below the threshold... Below the threshold, benefiting people matters more the worse off those people are... Above the threshold, or in cases concerning only trivial benefits below the threshold, no priority is to be given.’

(Roger Crisp, *Equality, Priority, and Compassion*, p.758)

The Beverly Hills case...

We can either give Château Lafite 1982 to ten rich people or we can give Château Latour 1982 to ten thousand super-rich people...

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<th>Ten rich people</th>
<th>Ten thousand super-rich people</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lafite 1982 to the rich people</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>90</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latour 1982 to the super-rich people</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>92</td>
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P1 If either egalitarianism or prioritarianism is true then there is at least a reason to give the Lafite 1982 to the rich people.

P2 There is no reason to give the Lafite 1982 to the rich people.

C Neither egalitarianism nor prioritarianism is true.

P2 would be plausible if the numbers indicated the *wealth* of the rich and super-rich people...
§2. Offensive and expensive tastes

T3 ‘...if men take a certain pleasure in discriminating against one another in subjecting others to a lesser liberty as a means of enhancing their self-respect then the satisfaction of these desires must be weighed in our deliberations according to their intensity, or whatever, along with other desires.’

(John Rawls, Theory of Justice, p.27)

P1 If welfare egalitarianism is true then it is a bad thing if Sarah and Joe have unequal well being, even if this is because Sarah’s desire to discriminate against other people is not satisfied.

P2 It is not a bad thing if Sarah and Joe have unequal well being if this is because Sarah’s desire to discriminate against other people is not satisfied.

C Welfare egalitarianism is false.

T4 ‘Equality of welfare seems to recommend that those with champagne tastes… who need more income simply to achieve the same level of welfare as those with less expensive tastes… should have more income on that account… But this seems counter-intuitive…

(Ronald Dworkin, What is Equality?, p.228)

§3. Luck egalitarianism

P1 It’s just a bit of good fortune to be born to parents wealthy enough to send you to a private school.

P2 It’s unfair – and so bad in itself – if some people fare better than others just as a result of good fortune.

C It’s unfair – and so bad in itself – if some people fare better than others just as a result of being born to parents wealthy enough to send them to a private school.

T5 ‘...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)

T6 ‘...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 unfair – and so bad in itself – if one person has a smaller distributive share than another just as a result of bad brute luck, as opposed to choices that they made and for which they can held responsible…

Distributive shares should be ambition-sensitive but endowment insensitive…

T7  ‘Option luck is a matter of how deliberate and calculated gambles turn out… whether someone gains or loses through accepting an isolated risk he or she should have anticipated and might have declined… Brute luck is a matter of how risks fall out that are not in that sense deliberate gambles.’


Is Rawls a proto luck egalitarian…?

T8  ‘Intuitively, the most obvious injustice of the system of natural liberty is that it permits distributive shares to be improperly influenced by these factors so arbitrary from a moral point of view.’

(John Rawls, Theory of Justice, p.72)

§4. Equality of opportunity

Formal equality of opportunity…

It is unfair and so bad in itself if one person has a smaller distributive share than another just as a result of their race or gender or sexual orientation, etc., but it is not unfair if this is because of their socio-economic background…

Conventional equality of opportunity…

It is unfair and so bad in itself if one person has a smaller distributive share than another just as a result of their race or gender or socio-economic background, but it is not unfair if this is because of how naturally clever or beautiful or talented they are…

P1  If it is unfair and so bad in itself that one person has a smaller distributive share than another just as a result of their race or gender, or their socio-economic background then this must be because it is unfair and so bad in itself that one person has a smaller distributive share than another just as a result of bad brute luck, as opposed to choices that they made and for which they can held responsible.
If it is unfair and so bad in itself that one person has a smaller distributive share than another just as a result of bad brute luck, as opposed to choices that they made and for which they can held responsible, then it must also be unfair and so bad in itself that one person has a smaller distributive share than another just as a result of how naturally clever or beautiful or talented they are.

If it is unfair and so bad in itself that one person has a smaller distributive share than another just as a result of their race or gender, or their socio-economic background then it must also be unfair and so bad in itself that one person has a smaller distributive share than another just as a result of how naturally clever or beautiful or talented they are.

P2 is true… but is P1…?

Couldn’t there be some other justification for preventing gender, race, and socio economic background, but not cleverness or talent, from influencing distributive shares…?

Another possible response…

It is unfair and so bad in itself that one person has a smaller distributive share than another just as a result of their race or gender, or their socio-economic background. This is because these are morally arbitrary factors, whereas natural cleverness and talent are not morally arbitrary factors…

References