The Value of Equality
Lecture 3: Democratic equality

§1. Recap: objections to luck egalitarianism

It is unjust if people end up with less of whatever we think is good – happiness, opportunity, resources – simply as a result of brute bad luck.

Objection 1: Luck egalitarianism shows insufficient concern for the victims of bad option luck.

Objection 2: Luck egalitarianism shows insufficient respect for the victims of brute bad luck.

T1 ‘In focusing on correcting a supposed cosmic injustice, [luck egalitarianism] has lost sight of the distinctively political aims of egalitarianism. 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)

T2 ‘Equality... is not, in the first instance, a distributive ideal, and its aim is not to compensate for misfortune. It is, instead, a moral ideal governing the relations in which people stand to one another... It claims that human relations must be conducted on the basis of an assumption that everyone's life is equally important, and that all members of a society have equal standing.’

(Samuel Scheffler, What is Egalitarianism?, p.21-22)

§2. Eliminating oppression

What is oppression?

T3 ‘...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)

So what is domination? What is exploitation? What does it mean to marginalize or demean somebody?

What is a community of equals?
It is a community in which people treat others with concern and respect, and accept the obligation to act in ways that are justifiable to others.

§3. Equality and democracy

What is special about these ways of good and bad ways of relating to people? Their connection to democracy.

T4 ‘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)

P1 Democracy is valuable.
P2 Equality is a necessary condition of democracy.
P3 If X is valuable, and Y is a necessary condition of X, then X is valuable.
C Equality is valuable.

Here democracy consists in collective self-determination and equality consists in mutual respect, the elimination of oppression, etc.

P2* Mutual respect, the elimination of oppression, etc. is a necessary condition of collective self-determination.
P1* Collective self-determination is valuable.

Suppose democracy is understood instead as polyarchy…

T5 ‘Polyarchy is a political order distinguished at the most general level by two broad characteristics: Citizenship is extended to a relatively high proportion of adults, and the rights of citizenship include the opportunity to oppose and vote out the highest officials in government.’

(Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*, p.220)

§4. Distributive and relational equality

Luck egalitarianism is a representative of *distributive egalitarianism*. Democratic egalitarianism is a representative of *relational egalitarianism*.

According to distributive egalitarianism, what is valuable is equality in the distribution of some good, e.g. happiness, or resources, etc. According to relational egalitarianism, what is valuable is equality in our relationships to one another.

Response 1…

Why not claim both that distributive equality is valuable and that relational equality is valuable…?
‘…it is compatible with luck egalitarianism to regard social standing as just one equalisandum, or dimension in which people should be equal, among others.’

(Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, Luck Egalitarians Versus Relational Egalitarians, p.221)

‘…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.’

(Jerry Cohen, Rescuing Justice and Equality, p.7)

It is worth noting that one of Cohen’s final unfinished pieces of work explores the question what it means to regard, and treat, other people as equals…

Response 2…

Why not claim that distributive equality is a necessary condition of relational equality…? If resources are distributed unequally, those with more resources will use them to dominate those with fewer resources. If resources are distributed unequally, those with fewer resources will be marginalized and demeaned by those with more resources.

An objection to Response 2…

It is plausible that sufficiency in the distribution of resources is a necessary condition of the elimination of oppression, but there is no reason to think that substantial equality in the distribution of resources is a necessary condition of the elimination of oppression.

‘…democratic equality guarantees not effective access to equal levels of functioning but effective access to levels of functioning sufficient to stand as an equal in society… To be capable of standing as an equal in civil society requires literacy. But in the US context, it does not require literacy in any language other than English, nor the ability to interpret obscure works of literary theory… In other countries, multilingual literacy might be required for equal standing.’

(Elizabeth Anderson, What is the Point of Equality?, p.319)

Is sufficiency sufficient…? Suppose that everybody has high levels of intelligence and large quantities of resources. But suppose that a few people have really high levels of intelligence and much larger quantities of resources. Won’t these lucky few be in a position to dominate, marginalize, and in other ways oppress, the others?
Objections to Response 1…

Luck egalitarianism is inconsistent with mutual respect (cf. Anderson’s critique of luck egalitarianism, letters from the State Equality Board, etc.)

Crudely, Anderson’s argument for the incompatibility of luck egalitarianism and relational egalitarianism is this:

P1 Relational equality requires us to accept the obligation to act in ways that are justifiable to others.

P2 Compensating people for brute bad luck is not justifiable to others.

C Relational equality requires us not to compensate people for brute bad luck.

§5. Conclusion

It is a fair objection against luck egalitarians – and against distributive egalitarians in general – that they have spent so much time, and spilled so much ink, arguing about the metric of distributive equality, when they could have been helping us better to understand the forms and sources of oppression. But surely luck egalitarians can take this objection on board without giving up their luck egalitarianism…?

It is plausible that domination, marginalization, etc. are unequal relations that we have moral reason to eliminate. But it is so plausible that this is because of the connection between these unequal relations and collective self-determination?

Bibliography