The Value of Equality

Lecture 2: Luck egalitarianism

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Outline of the lecture…

1. What is luck egalitarianism?
2. Arguments for luck egalitarianism
3. The luck/choice distinction
4. Victims of bad option luck
5. Victims of bad brute luck
What is luck egalitarianism?

From the Sutton Trust’s 2016 report *Leading People*…

42% of British Bafta winners and 67% of British Oscar winners went to a private school.

74% of senior judges, and 61% of top doctors went to a private school.

50% of the Cabinet, and 32% of the MPs, went to a private school.
What is luck egalitarianism?

From university statistics, available online…

In 2015, 44% of students admitted to Oxford, and 38% of British students admitted to Cambridge, went to a private school.

Less than 7% of the British population went to a private school.
What is luck egalitarianism?

It’s just a matter of good luck to be born with parents wealthy enough to send you to a private school.

People who go to private school haven’t done anything to deserve their huge advantages over those who have not.

Surely, then, it is unfair that they have these advantages.
What is luck egalitarianism?

It is just a matter of good luck to be born clever or beautiful.

So, by the same token, it is unfair that people have advantages just because they were born clever or beautiful.

Again, it is just a matter of good luck to be born, as I was, into a family of teachers.

So, by the same token, it is unfair that I have advantages just because I was born into a family of teachers.
What is luck egalitarianism?

This implies that egalitarians should not aim for equality of opportunity.

They should not aim to create a meritocratic society.

If we create state grammar schools, then we reduce the extent to which people are advantaged by being born to wealthy parents.

But we increase the extent to which people are advantaged by being naturally clever.

And nobody chose to be naturally clever, any more than they chose to be born to wealthy parents.
What is luck egalitarianism?

‘…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)
What is luck egalitarianism?

**Luck Egalitarianism**

It is unjust if one person is disadvantaged relative to another person…

…i.e. has less of whatever we think is good…

…because of bad luck…

…as opposed to because of the things that he/she has chosen.
What is luck egalitarianism?


‘…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)
What is luck egalitarianism?

Option luck and brute luck...

‘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.’


Suppose A and B both buy stocks, and A’s stocks rise while B’s stocks fall, then A has benefited from better ‘option luck’.

Suppose that A, but not B, is hit by a meteorite. Then A has benefited from better ‘brute luck’.
What is luck egalitarianism?

A quick detour into the history of ideas…

Where did luck egalitarianism come from?

Some philosophers claim to find proto-luck egalitarianism in Rawls’ *Theory of Justice*.

‘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)
What is luck egalitarianism?

There is also the debate over the problem of *expensive tastes*.

P1 If justice requires us to equalize welfare, then it requires us to give additional resources to people with expensive tastes.

P2 Justice does not require us to give additional resources to people with expensive tastes.

C Justice does not require us to equalize welfare.

Dworkin uses this as an argument that justice requires us to equalize resources. Cohen argues that we can save welfare-based egalitarianism if we distinguish between expensive tastes *that we have chosen to cultivate* and expensive tastes *that we are unlucky enough to have and to be unable to shake off*. 
Arguments for luck egalitarianism

Is luck egalitarianism the best explanation of our egalitarian intuitions?

If P is true, and the best explanation for the truth of P is the truth of Q, then Q is true.

*No Shit*

It is unjust if people are advantaged/disadvantaged because of their race or sex.

*Luck Egalitarianism*

It is unjust if people are advantaged/disadvantaged because of things that they did not choose.
Arguments for luck egalitarianism

One explanation for the truth of *No Shit* is the truth of *Luck Egalitarianism*.

P1  Nobody chose their race or their sex.

P2  It is unjust if people are advantaged/disadvantaged because of things that they did not choose.

C   It is unjust if people are advantaged/disadvantaged because of their race or their sex.
Arguments for luck egalitarianism

Is there any other equally good explanation of the truth of No Shit…?

If people are disadvantaged because of their race or their sex, this will be very bad for the people in question.

They will be stigmatized by other people. They will suffer from a lack of self-worth. They will feel envy and resentment.

It will also be very bad for society as a whole.

It will entrench relations of power between the advantaged and disadvantaged race/sex; relations that are incompatible with democracy. It will increase the risk of racial/sexual conflict.

But are these reasons to think that sexual/racial inequality is unjust?
Arguments for luck egalitarianism

P1  It is unjust if people are rewarded/punished for things for which they are not morally responsible.

P2  People are not morally responsible for things they did not choose.

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

P1 is obviously true…

…but C is not Luck Egalitarianism.
Arguments for luck egalitarianism

P1  It is unjust if people have advantages that they did not earn.

P2  People have not earned advantages if they have them as a result of things they did not choose.

C   It is unjust if people have advantages as a result of things they did not choose.

C is Luck Egalitarianism…

…but is P1 obviously true?
Is it unjust that I am advantaged relative to a classmate, given that my advantage is due \textit{not} to the fact that I am naturally more clever, but rather to the fact that I chose to work hard at school so that I could go to Oxford…?

Would I have chosen to work hard at school so that I could go to Oxford if I hadn’t been born into a family of teachers…?

Would I have chosen to work hard at school so that I could go to Oxford if I hadn’t been raised to believe that the world was my oyster…?

It seems that the fact that I chose to work hard at school so that I could go to Oxford is itself a consequence of things that I did not choose.
The luck/choice distinction

‘…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)

‘…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)
‘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)

How does this help…?
‘…the fact that a person’s urgent medical needs can be traced to his own negligence or foolishness or high-risk behavior is not normally seen as making it legitimate to deny him the care he needs. Still less do people automatically forfeit any claim to assistance if it turns out that their urgent needs are the result of prudent or well-considered choices that simply turned out badly.’

(Samuel Scheffler, *What is Egalitarianism?*, p.18-19)
Suppose the victim of bad option luck is an uninsured driver.

‘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)
Victims of bad option luck

Does *Luck Egalitarianism* really say that it is ‘legitimate to deny [the victim of bad option luck] the care he needs’…?

It depends what ‘legitimate’ means.

*Luck Egalitarianism* doesn’t say that we have no reason to give care and assistance to the victims of bad option luck.

It doesn’t even say that we have no reason of *justice* to give care and assistance to the victims of bad option luck.

It only says that we have no reason of *distributive* justice to give care and assistance to the victims of bad option luck.
Victims of bad option luck

But shouldn’t *Luck Egalitarianism* also say that one of the things that is unjust is if people *avoid* being disadvantaged relative to others, and not because of things they have chosen?

*Luck Egalitarianism* says that inequalities that don’t reflect the different choices that people have made are morally arbitrary, and, therefore, unjust.

But what about *equalities* that don’t reflect the different choices that people have made. Aren’t these equally morally arbitrary, and, therefore, unjust?

Isn’t it unfair on prudent people if the reckless are given the same care and assistance?
‘…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)

Anderson thinks that this is true both with respect to the victims of bad option luck and with respect to the victims of bad brute luck.
Victims of bad brute luck

FROM THE STATE EQUALITY BOARD

‘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)
Victims of bad brute luck

P1  If people are disadvantaged as a result of being stupid or untalented, ugly or socially awkward, then they are disadvantaged but not as a result of things that they have chosen.

P2  It is unjust if people are disadvantaged but not as a result of things that they have chosen.

C1  It is unjust if people are disadvantaged as a result of being stupid or untalented, ugly or socially awkward.

C2  If people are disadvantaged as a result of being stupid or untalented, ugly or socially awkward, then we ought to compensate them with a paycheck.