The Value of Equality

Lecture 3: Democratic equality

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Introduction

Outline of the lecture…

1. Recap: objections to luck egalitarianism

2. Eliminating oppression

3. Equality and democracy

4. Distributive and relational equality

5. Conclusion

Recap: objections to luck egalitarianism

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*.

It is unjust if people end up with more of whatever we think is good simply because of…

…their race or their sex…

…or the wealth or profession of their parents…

…or even how beautiful or clever they are.

Recap: objections to luck egalitarianism

Objection 1:

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

Suppose that there is a traffic collision that
leaves two drivers equally badly injured.
Rosie is only badly injured because she was
recklessly driving without a fastened seatbelt.
Jim is badly injured simply as a result of bad
luck.

If luck egalitarianism is true (so the objection
goes), then we have no reason to help Jim.

Recap: objections to luck egalitarianism

If luck egalitarianism is true, then we have no reason of justice to help Rosie…

…but we may still have a humanitarian reason to help Rosie.

But now suppose that there is a third driver, Bob, who was equally badly injured in the collision, and who was also recklessly driving without a fastened seatbelt…

…and suppose that we can help a maximum of two victims of the collision.

Recap: objections to luck egalitarianism

Objection 2:

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

Messages from the State Equality Board…

Dear Sir or Madam,

Here is your monthly allowance of additional resources to compensate you for being so…

…stupid/ugly/untalented/lazy/unlovable…
(please delete as appropriate)

Recap: objections to luck egalitarianism

'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)

Recap: objections to luck egalitarianism

'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)

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Eliminating oppression

According to Anderson…

…the negative aim of egalitarianism is to eliminate oppression*.*

What is oppression?

'….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)

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Eliminating oppression

When does Jim *dominate* Rosie…?

…when Jim threatens Rosie with physical violence if she doesn't do what he wants.

…when Jim threatens Rosie with emotional abuse if she doesn't do what he wants.

When does Jim *exploit* Rosie…?

…when Jim takes unfair advantage of Rosie.

Groups can also dominate and exploit other groups…

Eliminating oppression

When does Jim *marginalize* Rosie…?

…when Jim prevents Rosie from participating in society/collective decision-making.

When does Jim *demean* Rosie…?

…when Jim besmirches Rosie's reputation, or lowers her status in the eyes of others.

Groups can also marginalize and demean other groups…

Eliminating oppression

According to Anderson…

…the positive aim of egalitarianism is to create a *community of equals.*

What is a *community of equals*?

It is a community in which people…

…treat others with concern and respect…

…accept the obligation to act in ways that are justifiable to others.

Equality and democracy

What is special about these ways of good and bad ways of relating to people…?

Their connection to democracy…

'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)

Remind you of anybody…?

Equality and democracy

The democratic argument…

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.

Equality and democracy

P2   Equality is a necessary condition of democracy.

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

Why think that this is true…?

If Jim is dominating Rosie, then Rosie's votes in the assembly will be expressions of Jim's will, not Rosie's…

…in which case the overall tally of votes won't be an expression of the will of part of the community, not the whole community.

Cf. Rousseau on the general will.

Equality and democracy

The argument is also plausible in the case of Jim marginalizing Rosie…

…and in the case of Jim demeaning Rosie.

It is less clear how Jim exploiting Rosie is inconsistent with collective self-determination…

…although perhaps a necessary condition of Jim exploiting Rosie is that Rosie has already been demeaned, or marginalized, or dominated.

What about mutual respect…?

Anderson appears to think that this is a necessary condition of the sort of deliberation that is required for collective decision-making.

Equality and democracy

P1   Democracy is valuable.

P1*   Collective self-determination is valuable.

Why think that this is true?

Because collective self-determination is a necessary condition of mutual respect, the elimination of oppression, etc…?

In that case our argument is circular.

Because the results of collective self-determination are the decisions that everybody would make if they were ideally rational?

In that case our argument turns on a controversial claim about rationality.

Equality and democracy

Suppose democracy is understood as polyarchy…

'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)

Equality and democracy

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.

If democracy consists in polyarchy…

…and equality consists in mutual respect, the elimination of oppression, etc., then…

…P1 is true, but P2 is false?

Distributive and relational equality

So far, I have contrasted *luck egalitarianism* (e.g. Cohen) with *democratic egalitarianism* (e.g. Anderson).

But each of these positions is representative of a family of egalitarianisms.

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.

Distributive and relational equality

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)

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Relational and distributive equality

'…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)

Distributive and relational equality

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 inevitably be marginalized and demeaned by those with more resources.

So equality in the distribution of resources is a necessary condition of the elimination of oppression.

So distributive equality is a necessary condition of relational equality.

Distributive and relational equality

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.

If people have a sufficient quantity of resources, then they will be secure from domination, exploitation, marginalization, etc.

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Distributive and relational equality

'…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)

Distributive and relational equality

But 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?

To flesh out this argument, we will need a much more worked out theory of the sources of oppression.

Distributive and relational equality

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.

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?