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SOME WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

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MANY RECENT discussions of the issue of social equality have suggested that there are two polar concepts of equality — " equality of opportunity" and "equality or results" — and that we must choose between these mutually exclusive normative principles.[1] While this outlook has been most characteristic of supporters of "equality of opportunity" (or, more accurately, a certain conception of equality of opportunity), it can be found among advocates of "equality of results" as well.[2] I shall argue in this paper that such an approach is fundamentally misleading and is based upon conceptual confusion regarding the principle of equality of opportunity. Just as there is not a single, essential concept of "equality," neither is there a single, essential concept of "equality of opportunity." Like the more general concept of equality, the meaning of the concept of equality of opportunity depends upon its context in a particular theory of distributive justice. Moreover, the relationship between "equality of opportunity" and "equality of results" will differ in the context of different substantive theories of distribution. Whether or not the two principles are mutually exclusive will depend upon the particular conception of equality of opportunity which is being invoked. There is more than one way of thinking about equality of opportunity.

I

Critics of egalitarianism often charge that "equality" means or implies "sameness" and that egalitarians are asserting either that all persons are in fact the "same," which is patently false, or that all persons should in all instances be treated identically, which is both impossible and undesirable. Both of these objections are misdirected, however. First, the heart of egalitarian thought is not any empirical claim which overlooks the obvious differences between human beings, but is rather a normative claim that individuals ought to be considered and treated as equals, regardless of all those respects in which they are, in fact, unequal. Moreover, the prescriptive norm of equality does not imply the elimination of differences among individuals. The principle of equality is not so much a prescription that all people be treated identically in all circumstances as it is a presumption against their being treated differently. Few egalitarians propose equality in any absolute sense; rather, they usually advocate eliminating particular kinds of existing inequalities.[3] They may differ, of course, over which inequalities are just or

[1] See, e.g., Daniel Bell, "On Meritocracy and Equality," *The Public Interest,* Fall 1972, pp. 29-68, reprinted in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 408-55; Charles Frankel, "The New Egalitarianism and the Old," *Commentary,* September 1973, pp. 54-61; James S. Coleman, "Equality of Opportunity and Equality of Results," *Harvard Educational Review* 43 (February 1973): 129-37; Robert Nisbet, "The Fatal Ambivalence of an Idea: Equal Freemen or Equal Serfs?" *Encounter,* December 1976, pp. 10-21.

[2] See Christopher Jencks et al., *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), pp. 3-15. Cf. the critique of Jencks in Lawrence B. Joseph, "Normative Assumptions in Educational Policy Research: The Case of Jencks's Inequality," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* November 1977, pp. 101-13.

[3] See, e.g., Stanley I. Benn, "Egalitarianism and the Equal Consideration of Interests," in J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman, eds., *Equality: Nomos IX* (New York: Atherton,

unjust and over how much equality is attainable or should be attained. There is a considerable difference, then, between the idea of equality as exemplified in the general maxim that "all people are to be treated equally" and the specification of the respects in which individuals are to be considered equals. One could say that while there is one formal concept of equality ("equals are to be treated equally"), there are a number of different substantive conceptions.[4]

One of these more substantive conceptions is equality of opportunity. In its most general sense, equality of opportunity usually means that people should be enabled to attain some particular social good on the basis of their natural abilities and/or actual achievement and not on the basis of arbitrary or ascriptive factors such as race, religion, sex, social class origins, etc. That is, an individual's life-chances should depend on the individual's own capacities. In the broadest sense, this usually refers to the development of one's talents and/or the access to various places in the social structure, the idea being that one should not be barred from attaining certain social positions because of one's initial place in the social order. Beyond this general idea, however, the meaning of equality of opportunity becomes somewhat more problematic. Exactly what constitutes giving individuals an "equal opportunity" is not altogether self-evident. It is necessary, therefore, to examine a number of distinct conceptions of equality of opportunity.

We should first distinguish between "formal equality of opportunity" and "compensatory equality of opportunity." Formal equality of opportunity is essentially a principle of non-discrimination or procedural fairness. Social positions are to be open equally to all in accordance with people's demonstrated talents and abilities. Formal equality of opportunity thus suggests recruitment according to "merit," as defined by actual performance or achievement (as opposed to ascriptive criteria of various sorts). Compensatory equality of opportunity, on the other hand, also suggests recruitment according to "merit," but a distinction is made between one's natural abilities and one's actual performance and achievement. It requires that individual achievement be a reflection of individual ability and effort alone *and* that the development of one's capacities not be hampered by the social position into which one is born.[5] "Pre-existing" inequalities (i.e., disadvantages arising from one's social class origins) are not taken as given, but are viewed as obstacles for which there must be some compensation, in order that all individuals have an opportunity to demonstrate their natural capacities and to be judged on that basis.

The extent to which equality of opportunity is "compensatory" as opposed to "formal" will depend, in part, on its justification. We can distinguish two sorts of approaches here. One justification for equality of opportunity would be based on individual rights or moral claims and would stress the development of the talents and capacities of all individuals in society. An alternative justification would be some notion of the general social interest in terms of the efficient or "functional" allocation of individuals to social roles: in order to maximize efficiency or productivity from the point of view of society, important social positions ought to be filled by the most competent

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1967), pp. 61-78; Herbert Spiegelberg, "A Defense of Human Equality," *Philosophical Review* 53 (March 1944): 101-24.

[4] See Sanford A. Lakoff, *Equality in Political Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 6.

[5] This distinction between formal and compensatory equality of opportunity is analogous to Rawls's distinction between "careers open to talents" and "fair equality of opportunity." See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 65-75. Cf. Charles Frankel, "Equality of Opportunity," *Ethics* 81 (April 1971): 203-4.

and qualified individuals.[6] If the underlying criterion is "efficiency" or the "greater social good," then a society may, in terms of its own interest, see fit to limit the extent to which it goes beyond formal equality of opportunity. It is possible, of course, that maximum societal efficiency would require maximum development of talent from the lower classes. This would be an open empirical question, however. The talent pool available from the relatively privileged strata might provide enough qualified personnel, and compensatory equality of opportunity might not be needed. In fact, compensatory equality of opportunity could entail enormous social costs (or at least costs from the point of view of certain segments of society). To cite the most obvious example, a major commitment of social resources would be needed in order to institute and maintain a sufficiently effective educational system. Thus, insofar as the allocation of individuals to social roles is based not on what are regarded as the legitimate claims of individuals, but on "efficiency" in terms of the interests and welfare of "society," then equality of opportunity may theoretically be restricted, as long as there is sufficient incentive to attract relevant talent and encourage competent performance. A society which limited itself to formal equality of opportunity might still maximize productivity or the "general welfare," as long as there were enough talent to fill important social positions.[7]

Unfortunately, many advocates of equality of opportunity do not directly address the question of the degree to which we must go beyond formal equality of opportunity. That is, they do not specify what is required in order to compensate individuals for initial disadvantages associated with social class background, so as to provide everyone with a genuinely "fair" chance to develop his or her talents and to attain various social positions. To the extent that equality of opportunity is "formal," and to the extent that pre-existing inequalities are taken as given, the principle can be said to be the most "conservative" type of equality. Compensatory equality of opportunity, on the other hand, can have quite radical implications, when carried to its logical conclusion.

The implications of a complete "compensatory" formulation of the principle of equality of opportunity have led John Charvet to object that the notion is itself "incoherent and self-contradictory." The principle of equal opportunity, he says, "requires that in the development of one's natural abilities one should not be put in an advantageous or disadvantageous position with regard to one's competitors as the result of an association with other human beings who help and encourage one to develop . . . unless the access itself is awarded on merit."[8] It would be absurd, Charvet claims, to think that such access could be adequately controlled. Associations with others cannot possibly be made equal, since the people with whom one might

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[6] A similar point has been made by John Plamenatz, who distinguishes between (1) equal opportunity of service, i.e., the opportunity to acquire skills to perform the social roles for which one is by nature best suited, regardless of one's social background; and (2) equal opportunity of freedom, i.e., the opportunity of living as one wants to live. Equal opportunity of service can be defended on grounds of efficiency by people who have no concern whatsoever for freedom. In its own interest, society may try to ensure that anyone who is capable of rendering a service for which there is a demand is not prevented from doing so except by being less naturally able than others. There is no necessary connection, Plamenatz argues, between this notion of equal opportunity and either domocracy or freedom; on grounds of efficiency and expediency, equal opportunity of service is quite compatible with an authoritarian society. John P. Plamenatz, "Diversity of Rights and Kinds of Equality," in Pennock and Chapman, eds., *op. cit.*, pp.87-88.

[7] See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p.84.

[8] John Charvet, "The Idea of Equality as a Substantive Principle of Society," *Political Studies* 17 (1969): 4.

associate vary considerably in their own abilities. The only other alternative would be no associations at all, but complete independence from others would mean having no social relations whatsoever. Thus, Charvet concludes, a complete formulation of the principle of equality of opportunity ends in absurdity, since it becomes incompatible with any form of human society.[9]

Charvet's argument has been rightly criticized on the ground that he seems to think that a moral principle is meaningless unless it can be realized in absolute terms. The usefulness and validity of equality of opportunity as a working normative principle does not, however, depend on whether it can be effected absolutely. The important thing for an egalitarian would be that we move in the direction of less *unequal* opportunity.[10] In any event, no serious political thinker has advocated equality of opportunity in the extreme sense suggested by Charvet.

Notwithstanding Charvet's "absolutist" interpretation, however, equality of opportunity can still have radical implications with respect to the class structure of a given society. Since compensatory equality of opportunity suggests that the development of talents and skills ought not to be hampered by the social position into which one is born, it suggests as well that one's social position in adult life ought not to depend upon one's class origins. Thus, if we assume that natural ability is more or less randomly distributed over social classes, the result would be a society with enormous rates of upward and downward social mobility from one generation to the next. In order for such a system to work, i.e., in order to have genuinely "fair" equality of opportunity, people would have to be compensated thoroughly for initial disadvantages associated with their social background. Moreover, if we really wanted everyone to start out with an equal chance, so that only natural abilities counted, we would not only need an extremely effective educational system, but we might also have to abolish the nuclear family and institute collectivized child-rearing. In order to maximize "fair" allocation of individuals to various social positions, we would have to compensate not only for family background factors such as education and income, but also for class-related socialization patterns which affect things such as motivation.[11]

Even if we did not go as far as abolishing the nuclear family, we would still have to think in terms of rather far-reaching redistributive policies in accordance with need, so as to provide individuals from all social strata with roughly equal life-chances beginning in childhood. Put differently, if one is concerned with genuine compensatory equality of opportunity, so that only "merit" counts, then some measure of initial equality of condition would seem to be a necessary component of equal opportunity. Otherwise, the degree of inequality of results in one generation will inevitably create privileges which will affect the degree of inequality of opportunity in the next. It seems clear, then, that a large degree of distribution according to need is a prerequisite for anything beyond purely formal equality of opportunity. It is for precisely this reason that egalitarians such as R. H. Tawney have insisted that opportunities to "rise" are not a substitute for practical equality and that unless there is a large amount of equality of social condition in the first place, equality of opportunity is an illusion.[12]

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[9] Ibid., pp. 3-5.

[10] M. P. Masterson, "On Being Unfair to Rawls, Rousseau, and Williams *or* John Charvet and the Incoherence of Inequality," *British Journal of Political Science* 1 (April 1971): 209-22.

[11] See, e.g., Richard M. Merelman, "Social Mobility and Equal Opportunity," *American Journal of Political Science* 17 (May 1973): especially 214-16.

[12] R. H. Tawney, *Equality* (New York: Barnes and Noble/Unwin Books, 1964), pp. 106-7.

II

I have so far suggested two different conceptions of equality of opportunity, as well as two different sorts of justification for the principle. I want now to turn to the question of the relationship between "equality of opportunity" and "equality of results." It may seem that the two concepts represent dichotomous and mutually exclusive principles: either people should be treated equally in terms of their opportunities to attain social rewards and social positions *or* they should be treated equally in terms of the positions which they actually attain. Recent survey research has posed the issue in precisely this manner:

> Here are two ways to deal with inequality. Which do you prefer?
>
> Equality of opportunity: giving each person an equal chance for a good education and to develop his or her ability.
>
> Equality of results: giving each person a relatively equal share of income and status regardless of education and ability.[13]

These two kinds of equality are certainly conceptually distinct; they are not, however, polar or dichotomous concepts—at least not in the sense usually claimed by some proponents of equality of opportunity.

The relationship between the two concepts can be understood in the following way: The principle of "equality of opportunity" and the principle of "equality or results" address themselves to two conceptually distinct social processes.[14] Equality of opportunity refers to the process by which individuals are recruited to social positions. As I have noted already, equality of opportunity means that the allocation of individuals to social roles should not be based on irrelevant, unfair, or unjust criteria (i.e., ascriptive criteria of any sort). In its compensatory formulation, it suggests that access to social positions should not depend upon one's social class origins. Equality of results, on the other hand, refers to the process of allocation of rewards and privileges attached to different social positions to which individuals are recruited. In other words, it refers to the stratification of social roles and the corresponding distribution of social rewards. This sort of equality (or inequality) is conceptually distinct from equality (or inequality) of opportunity; the difference between the two concepts rests not on their being mutually exclusive normative principles, but rather on their being applicable to distinct, though related, social processes. As equality of opportunity increases in a given society, intergenerational social mobility will presumably increase, but not necessarily the overall magnitude of social equality (i.e., "equality of results"). One can conceive of a society based on complete "compensatory" equality of opportunity in the sense that the ultimate place of individuals in the social system depends in no way on their social class origins. Nonetheless, such a society could still have unequal rewards and privileges attached to different social roles. In other words, the degree of "equality of results" in the sense of class destination would still be an open question. One could, then, equalize opportunities without equalizing the distribution of social rewards. Conversely, one could approach greater "equality or results" without endangering equality of opportunity.

The import of this distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of results can be seen by considering the two concepts in the context of a particular theory of distributive justice, one which is often closely as-

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[13] Everett C. Ladd, Jr., "Traditional Values Regnant," *Public Opinion* 1 (March/April 1978): 47-48.

[14] See Frank Parkin, *Class Inequality and Political Order: Social Stratification in Capitalist and Communist Societies* (New York: Praegar, 1971), p. 13.

sociated with the idea of equality of opportunity. The meritocratic theory of distributive justice involves the notion that a just society is one which rewards individuals in accordance with merit, i.e., ability, effort, achievement. Distribution according to merit suggests two related criteria: (1) individuals are to be recruited to social roles on the basis of merit, and (2) the stratification of social roles (and hence the distribution of social rewards) is to be based on merit. Since the process of recruitment is to be based on merit, the idea of meritocracy obviously suggests "equality of opportunity" of some sort. At the same time, the theory also presupposes an existing pattern of social stratification and a system of unequal social rewards in accordance with achievement or merit. In other words, it assumes equal rewards for "equal performance." Those displaying greater "merit" are not only said to "deserve" (on the basis of both justice and efficiency) to be the occupants of certain social positions, they are also said to be entitled to the rewards and privileges attached to those positions. Equality of opportunity in a meritocratic society necessarily means an equal chance to compete for desirable social positions and social rewards on the basis of merit. Regardless of the degree to which equal opportunity is compensatory, the meritocratic theory of distribution still assumes a certain pattern of social stratification. Thus, a meritocratic conception of equality of opportunity necessarily entails inequality in terms of social class destination.

This is why some writers refer to "equality of opportunity" and "equality of results" as polar concepts. When they talk about "equality of opportunity" *versus* "equality of results," they usually mean a meritocratic pattern of distribution as opposed to one which is more egalitarian in some sense. What they fail to note is the distinction between equality in terms of the recruitment or access to social roles and equality in terms of the stratification of social roles and the distribution of social rewards. Again, equality of opportunity refers to the former process, while equality of results refers to the latter. The meaning of equality of opportunity and the relationship between equality of opportunity and equality of results will depend upon their context in a specific theory of distributive justice. In the context of a meritocratic theory, the two concepts are necessarily incompatible in the sense that it is assumed that individuals will end up in unequally rewarded social positions as adults. This is not to say, however, that equality of opportunity and equality of results are logically incompatible by definition or that they cannot be related to one another in any way whatsoever. Defenders of "equality of opportunity" as opposed to "equality of results" are actually advocating one particular conception of equality of opportunity.

This leads to one final distinction. We must address the question of the *purpose* of equality of opportunity. In particular, we must ask: an equal opportunity to do what? We can distinguish between (1) "competitive equality of opportunity," i.e., an equal opportunity to compete for desirable social positions (on the basis of merit) and (2) "developmental equality of opportunity," i.e., an equal opportunity to develop one's talents and abilities to the fullest. While the former conception entails an equal opportunity to become unequal, the latter conception does not. Now it is certainly true that individuals have differing (and in some cases unequal) natural talents and abilities. Differences between individuals, however, do not automatically become *social* inequalities unless they affect the distribution of rewards and privileges in a society.[15] In a meritocratic society, the development of one's talents depends on the attainment of success in a competitive system, which distributes social rewards and privileges unequally. It is a system based on scarcity.

[15] See Plamenatz, "Diversity of Rights," pp. 80-81.

The nature of the scarcity, moreover, extends beyond material rewards and social status. From the point of view of society (or, put differently, from the top of the social ladder), there will always seem to be a shortage of talent. From this perspective, equality of opportunity means that everyone with equal qualifications is equally eligible for a given social position, even though, of course, not all eligible persons will be able to become incumbents of that role. Thus, equality of opportunity will be attained when qualified individuals fill given social roles, regardless of whether there are more persons qualified than there are available positions and regardless of whether everyone's talents have been developed to the fullest. From the point of view of the individual, on the other hand, there will always seem to be a shortage of opportunity. Thus, in this latter sense at least, equality of opportunity will not be attained unless one is actually able to exercise one's talents.[16]

As John Schaar has pointed out, since equality of opportunity within the context of a meritocratic society presupposes the inequality of rewards attached to social roles, the notion of an equal opportunity to develop one's capacities is misleading. The commitment to an equal opportunity to compete for desirable social positions implies prior acceptance of an already existing social-moral order. Thus, if a society values some talents or skills more than others, and rewards them accordingly, then not all talents will be developed equally.[17]

On the other hand, a (hypothetical) society which is radically egalitarian with respect to the stratification of social roles and the distribution of social rewards (i.e., "equality of results") has not necessarily jettisoned the idea of equality of opportunity to develop one's talents. It has, of course, rejected competitive equality of opportunity. In such a society, the development of one's talents is not tied to the attainment of success in competition for desirable social positions which have unequal rewards and privileges attached to them. While competitive equality of opportunity is equivalent to an equal opportunity of becoming unequal, developmental equality of opportunity is not. The relationship between equality of opportunity and equality of results will depend, then, upon which conception of equality of opportunity is being invoked. Equality of results (in terms of social class destination) can, of course, be said to be incompatible with competitive equality of opportunity. On the other hand, equality of results (in terms of social class destination) is not at all incompatible with developmental equality of opportunity. To the contrary, one could argue that it is a prerequisite.

III

Schaar has said that equality is a "protean word," while the idea of equality of opportunity seems somewhat less elusive.[18] The concept of equality of opportunity, however, does not have a single, essential meaning either. Its meaning, too, is dependent upon the context in which it is used. It does not, by itself, provide any clear criteria for the distribution of social rewards and privileges. It becomes operative and takes on substantive meaning only when accompanied by an independent criterion of distribution, i.e., when put in the context of a substantive theory of distributive

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[16] For two rather different kinds of discussion of this issue, see Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, *The Academic Revolution* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), pp. 146-54; and Alfred Schutz, "Equality and the Meaning Structure of the Social World," in Lyman Bryson et al., eds., *Aspects of Human Equality* (New York: Harper, 1956), pp. 74-78.

[17] John H. Schaar, "Equality of Opportunity, and Beyond," in Pennock and Chapman, eds., *op. cit.*, p. 230.

[18] Ibid., p. 228.

justice. What constitutes equality of opportunity in a given instance is not, therefore, self-evident. Moreover, the distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of results is more problematic than may first appear. The relationship between equality of opportunity and equality of results will depend upon a number of factors: whether one is talking about compensatory or formal equality of opportunity; whether the justification for equality of opportunity is societal efficiency or the moral claims of individuals; and whether the purpose of equality of opportunity is the competition for social rewards or the full development of the talents and the capacities of each individual.

There is, then, more than one way of thinking about equality of opportunity. While formal equality of opportunity is a rather moderate conception of equality, compensatory equality of opportunity can have potentially radical implications with respect to intergenerational social mobility. Any sort of compensatory conception of equal opportunity will require redistributive measures in order to counteract advantages or disadvantages rooted in different social class backgrounds. This may still involve, of course, inequalities regarding class destination, i.e., "equality of results." It is important to keep in mind, however, that since equality of opportunity and equality of results refer to distinct social processes (the recruitment of individuals to social roles and the distribution of social rewards), they are separable as normative principles. Equality of opportunity is necessarily incompatible with equality of results only if it means competitive equality of opportunity, that is, only in the context of a theory which entails an unequal distribution of social rewards and privileges. Developmental equality of opportunity, on the other hand, is not necessarily incompatible with equality of results.

Proponents of "equality of opportunity," as opposed to "equality of results," thus pose the issue in a misleading way. They are defending not "equality of opportunity" per se, but rather one particular conception of it (i.e., a meritocratic conception). Equality of opportunity and equality of results are polar concepts only from the point of view of certain theories of distributive justice (or, put differently, only in a certain ideological context). The debate between equality of opportunity and equality of results is, in part, a debate over different theories of distributive justice and, therefore, rather different conceptions of equality of opportunity.