

# Equality of opportunity essay



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Barry Tanser 050007737 What is 'equality of opportunity'? "Equality of opportunity is a political ideal that is opposed to caste hierarchy but not to hierarchy per se" (Arneson) The rationale behind this political ideal is that society is uneven, with privileges, standing and potential for success being heavily influenced by many different factors predetermined by birth. The political ideal places an individual in any given rung of social hierarchy as a result of their background. Equality of opportunity calls on a 'fairness of outcome' in society, but there are different conceptions on how this 'fairness of outcome' can be achieved and to what degree there can be a level playing field in order to achieve the possibility of any individual transcending economic and social hierarchy.

This essay shall deconstruct models for equality of opportunity, examining different views and conceptions in order to better understand equality of opportunity and its associated political ideals, with extensive references to criticism, and arguments that are pro equality of opportunity. The minimal or formal conception of equality of opportunity has a very basic framework. It dictates that all hierarchical positions in society are available, in theory to every individual. Strictly speaking it is not egalitarian. It merely allows opportunity based on merit and does not take into account a person's background, whether or not a candidate was disadvantaged or advantaged.

The minimal or formal conception does not allow for discrimination on the grounds of race, gender or religion in most cases. It lays the foundation for most basic employment and human rights law and is aimed at determining that the most qualified candidates gain the most privileged positions. In the marketplace this has very simple consequences. The marketplace conforms

to the minimal or formal conception of equality of opportunity as long as jobs are not offered privately to groups and are publicised adequately so that any candidate has the opportunity to apply. If an employer selects its workforce on the basis of a lottery, this also breaches the principles of the conception. Only acceptable if all candidates are equally qualified) If a person, company or group boycott a product or company simply because they take exception to the race, gender or religion of company members, then this would breach the minimal conception of equality of opportunity.

A good example of this would be patronage of public houses in Northern Ireland during the troubles. Members of the Protestant and Catholic communities drinking strictly in what they perceive as Catholic or Protestant owned/dominated public houses. To satisfy this conception of equality in the marketplace, all participants must have “ Morally innocent economic goals. (Arneson) Discrimination of an individual or group in employment or trade can only limit an individual or company and does not make financial sense, indeed it would be wasteful. So a competitive market will drive out formal inequalities in theory. The reasoning behind an argument for conventional equality of opportunity is that formal equality of opportunity does not go far enough.

“ Those endorsing the ‘ conventional’ conception hold that equality of opportunity requires more than people’s relevant competences... It matter also that all have an equal chance of acquiring those relevant competences. (Swift) This view has been backed up by Prime Minister Gordon Brown in a keynote speech recently, “ People are not disadvantaged by background, or by previous circumstances, from getting the opportunities that they need to

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realize their potential. "(Brown) The conventional conception of equality of opportunity tries to encourage parity as best possible within the demography of society, so a person's outcome in society depends on their effort and choices. The conventional conception does recognise the difficulties there are in making a completely level playing field.

In particular, social background hampers this most. For example, two young adults may leave home to attend university. Both receive the same funding, live in the same halls, are taught by the same lecturers and have the same reading materials. But one child has several family members with degrees who can proof read material and help with research, while the other's family members have a very limited education. A good example of the conventional conception in action again would be that of ' Affirmative action' in the U.

S. A. With a history of caste hierarchy of white men suppressing blacks, gaining access to superior education, jobs, wealth... for a long period of time, the formal conception of equality of opportunity still leaves the black man with a smaller chance of fulfilling his/her potential in comparison to their white compatriots. The conventional conception behind ' Affirmative action' promotes preference to blacks in relation to jobs until such a time that the polarity has been eradicated and the chances of fulfilling potential in both groups correlate or come close to correlation. The Conventional conception of equality of opportunity in most cases requires a redistribution of resources, taking more from the privileged for the benefit of the less privileged, but this does not guarantee a completely level playing field.

“ This is levelling the playing field understood as making it more level. ”

(Swift) The Radical conception of equality of opportunity goes further again, stating that fairness of outcome can not be completely achieved by the conventional conception. The radical conception recognises that there are more advantages and disadvantages that members of society attain with birth. Not only are there hereditary social disadvantages, but also natural ones too. One cannot help how intelligent or unintelligent they are. With the Conventional conception, those born with natural abilities can achieve their fairness of outcome even if they are born with social disadvantage, however those who are not born with such gifts are still destined to underachieve in comparison and even those with an advantageous background who have not the same gifts at birth can find themselves underachieving no matter how motivated they are.

The radical conception does accept that not all particular jobs should be open to everyone. Swift uses a good scenario to explain this. “ It would be odd to want the musically inept to have the same chance of becoming a concert pianist as the child prodigy. But opportunities to do particular jobs are not the same as opportunities to get the rewards usually associated with these jobs.

“ The Radical position promotes a meritocracy. Meritocracy being defined as a type of society where wealth, position, and social status are, through fair competition, gained on the basis that the persons are most qualified.

Arneson defines the delicate relationship between the radical conception of equality of opportunity and meritocracy. “ According to the broad meritocracy ideal, a justification for equality of opportunity is that its

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fulfilment is necessary if it is to be the case that individuals genuinely get what they deserve. If equality of opportunity is violated then either the less qualified are selected over the more qualified or not all individuals have equal chance to become qualified.

Equality of opportunity either a means of meritocracy or constitutive of it. Robert Nozick, a libertarian, criticizes equality of opportunity on the grounds that it impedes fundamental rights to own property. Nozick finds the idea of equality of opportunity to contradict itself when it is extended to redistribution of resources. “ The major objection to speaking of everyone’s having a right to various things such as equality of opportunity, life, and so on, and enforcing this right, is that these ‘ rights’ require a substructure of things and materials and actions; and other people may have rights and entitlement over these.

However Nozick does recognize that the ideals of equality of opportunity are malevolent and would be beneficial if not for the aforementioned flaw. He uses a metaphor of two separate planets with differing opportunities to convey his libertarian concept of how equality of opportunity should arise. The less opportune planet can be developed by its counterpart through choice, getting around the issue of redistribution of property and substructure of materials. “ Wouldn’t it be better if the person with less opportunity had an equal opportunity? If one could so equip him without violating anyone else’s entitlements in order to acquire the resources. ” All in all, the libertarian’s view of equality of opportunity is hard to define.

On the one hand it protects the right of the likes of statistical discrimination with the notion that everyone has the same possibilities, purely because any person has the ability to agree mutual terms with another and their lockean right are still respected. Though the libertarians view can also be viewed as the minimal conception of equality of opportunity, as no laws can be enforced to prevent a group (race or other) from attaining a position. The libertarian's view is anarchical and criticizes the conventional conception of equality of opportunity as being competitive. " The person having better opportunities can merely be viewed as someone better off, or as someone not choosing to aid, but as someone blocking or impeding the person having lesser opportunities from becoming better off. " (Nozick) John C.

Schaar's criticism of equality of opportunity is, like Nozick, of a libertarian stance. Schaar focuses his attention on the conventional conception but does not directly address it's radical counterpart. Schaar's deconstruction of equality of opportunity is much more hardline that of Nozick's He dismisses conventional equality of opportunity's popularity, claiming that " It is rarely subjected to intellectual challenge. It is as though all parties have agreed that certain other conceptions of equality, and notably the radical democratic conception, are just too troublesome to deal with because they have too many complex implications. " It is as though Schaar sees the conventional conception as a kop out, a safe haven for centre left and right parties. Schaar claims that conventional equality of opportunity is conservative in that it maintains a status quo and ensures no radical changes can be made, whether libertarian or egalitarian.

Schaar vehemently rejects that the outcome of this conception is fair. “ All that happens is that individuals are given the chance to struggle up the social ladder, change their position on it, and step on the fingers of those beneath them. ” (Galston argues that efficiency aids social good. ) Schaar through this believes that the conventional conception of equality of opportunity ignores the community of man. He uses the metaphor of a footrace, with only one possible winner, to illustrate what he feels is merely just a shifting of the goalposts in terms of social hierarchy.

“ It reduces man to a bundle of abilities, an instrument valued according to it’s capacity for performing socially valued functions with more or less efficiency. ” Schaar argues that the conventional conception will serve only to further inequalities by creating a new caste hierarchy/oligarchy that enjoys immense superiority in ability and attainment to the masses. William Galston though provides an interesting argument against this, stating that boundaries of specialization generate this kind of stereotype for equality of opportunity. He calls for a redistribution of responsibilities, which he believes would not have any adverse effect on efficiency, in order to reduce hierarchies within the workplace. Galston too, rejects the notion that a new caste/oligarchy would arise.

He argues that creative jobs don’t necessarily justify socially necessary incentives, that personal fulfilment and respect are enough to satisfy. Every attempted formulation of equality stumbles the mystery and the indefinability of the creature for and about whom the formulation is made. In the end, it makes no sense to say that all men are equal, or that two men are, because it is an impossibility to say what a man is. ” This inability to



define man and the accusation that equality of opportunity will inevitably create a new caste hierarchy is where Schaar's argument loses some credibility. He paints a picture of the equality of opportunity being a primitive conception but only offers philosophical hyperbole to back his libertarian perspective. Liberal defense of equality of opportunity by William Galston in particular, challenges many of these critiques.

The libertarian view that any persons ability to agree mutual terms with another makes for a fair outcome is challenged. Galston, views Nozick's anarchical viewpoint as too idealistic and impractical. " Within every community, certain kinds of ability are generally prized. Being excluded from an equal chance to develop them means that one is unlikely to have much value to exchange with others.

" This assertion calls on social intervention in order to permit full participation in a market economy. The communitarian argument against equality of opportunity on the basis that it promotes a ' rat race' society can be argued against. Schaar's notion that it is a destructive struggle is challenged directly by Galston. Galston point out that competition has positives to offer to society.

Some competition brings human beings closer together, into communities of shared endeavor and mutual respect. Consider the embrace of two exhausted boxers at the end of a match. " Indeed Galston points out that competition in itself is a form of community, with peoples agreeing on a platform which pushes their collective abilities for the good of all involved, having a type of domino effect in many arenas, for example scientific

competition can lead to simultaneous discoveries, again benefiting all involved. The genetic argument against the radical conception of equality of opportunity is one that has gathered pace with biological discovery. It may soon be possible to alter the genetic constitutions of future generations, which leads to the possibility that human traits will come under human control, allowing the possibility to eradicate natural advantage.

“ Along this line some argue that advances in genetic knowledge unsettle current moral conceptions including conceptions of equal opportunity by falsifying their factual presuppositions. ” But the argument against this is deliberate choice of mating on the grounds to pass on particular traits to a child has been going on long before the possibility to genetically fix future generations ever became a talking point.. Objection to equality of opportunity on the grounds of morality and democracy is expressed by Micheal Walzer amongst others. He expresses the opinion that it cannot apply to the sphere of politics because of a lack of rationally binding conception of the good, with “ no technique for selecting the ends of political life. Walzer does not have the same faith in the ability of the people to influence political institutions like Rawls and other such idealists.

However William Galston expresses the opinion that democratic procedure can be put in place to ensure that if the peoples who are upholding equality of opportunity somehow lose their way and contradict or stray from civic consciousness, there will still be a safety net in place to ensure equality of opportunity is upheld. Galston uses the U. S supreme court and one particular ruling as a blueprint for this. In Brown vs. board of education, for example, the U.

S Supreme Court rendered a decision that would certainly that would certainly have been rejected by majority vote at the time, but was ultimately accepted as the authoritative interpretation of American principles. ”

America is not alone in it’s fondness to equality of opportunity. As mentioned earlier in the essay it extends to Britain and most developed countries. It is however a complex notion with many different interpretations, which at times can contradict eachother. Equality of opportunity has a wide spectrum in which it is spread across, enveloping different ideas and degrees of justice and morality. At it’s most diluted, equality of opportunity borders on the libertarian and at it’s strongest almost touches strong egalitarianism.

Equality of opportunity though has a place within most political climates with the varying nature of it’s conceptions. Bibliography Arneson, Richard, “ Equality of Opportunity”, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2002 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed. ), URL = .

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