



“Summary of article by Marc Fleurbaey: Equal Opportunity or Equal Social Outcome?” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 3: Human Well-Being and Economic Goals. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 262-266

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The traditional approach of normative economics to issues of distribution is to seek to equalize outcomes, defined in terms of subjective wellbeing, or welfare. However, recent debates over the appropriate object of egalitarian concerns have shifted away from welfare toward problems related to the selection of other relevant variables.

The notion that egalitarianism must be selective applies on two levels. First, the individual outcome to be equalized must be identified. For instance, normative economics selects welfare, while Amartya Sen's capability view asserts that the thing to be equalized is appropriately defined choice sets. Second, once the outcome is selected, the factors that influence it must be specified. Most researchers now divide these factors into three main categories: resources, factors controlled by social institutions that can be allocated to and redistributed by agents; talents, factors controlled neither by government nor individuals, such as inheritable traits or irreducible social circumstances; and will, factors over which individuals have control and responsibility, such as ambitions. The framework of "factor selective egalitarianism" identifies these three factors and seeks to compensate for differences in talents -- but not in will -- by appropriate allocation of resources. Disagreements among authors pursuing factor-selective egalitarianism are mainly to be found in the area where the line is drawn between talents and will, and in the means recommended for compensating talent differentials.

Although there are many important differences between the positions of the following theorists, their views can generally be divided into two camps that compete over where to draw the line between talent and will. The "equal resources" school is exemplified by Rawls and Dworkin, who place goals and ambitions espoused by individuals in the will category. The resources needed to pursue these two factors are located in the talent category. On the other side, the "equal opportunity" school, including Arneson, Cohen, Roemer and Sen, places all factors for which individuals are morally responsible in the will category and all factors (aside from resources) that are outside of the individuals' control in the talent category.

The debates over what to equalize are similarly divided. The equal resources school advocates the equalization of extended bundles of resources and talents across individuals, while the equal opportunity school contends that choice sets rather than resource bundles are the appropriate objects of compensation.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY VIEW

"The equal opportunity approach is generally empty, inefficient, unfeasible, and it relies on a shaky sociological and philosophical basis." (P. 27.) The main feature of this approach is its focus on options. Equal opportunity is achieved only if each person faces an array of options that is equivalent to every one else's. Because people may differ in their awareness of available options, in their ability to choose among these options, and in their character strength to follow through on chosen options, the equal opportunity view must seek to accommodate these differences. This challenge can be met in one of three ways: (1) equalize the ability to negotiate equivalent options; (2) allow the choice sets to be nonequivalent so as to counterbalance differences in ability to negotiate options; or (3) equalize the choice sets and hold that any inequalities in people's negotiating abilities are due to causes for which individuals are personally responsible.

SEPARABILITY CONDITION

The equal opportunity view implicitly assumes that resources can compensate for talent differentials independently of differences among individual motivations or wills. This assumption is known as a separability condition. For instance, compensating for blindness with extra income should be independent of the effort made by a blind person. As an example, if ten percent more income makes blind person *i* as well-off as sighted person *j*, both of whom make little effort in their lives, then the same ten percent more income will benefit *i* in the same way as *j* if both are ambitious. In fact, the separability condition is realistic only in a small number of cases where resources and talent have the same nature and are additive. For example, there may be sound reasons to apply the separability condition to compensate for inherited wealth inequalities through money transfers. However, this reasoning does not support its application to situations involving more generalized social inequalities. It turns out, also, that the separability condition becomes both more necessary and logically harder to achieve as we consider larger groups.

Problems with the separability condition go to the heart of the choice set approach to equality. Factor selective egalitarianism assumes two goals: more resources for less talent, and better outcomes for better wills. Without the separability condition, these two goals are incompatible. Other problems arise when this approach is studied in a market setting, or if one attempts to achieve factor selective egalitarianism at the same time as Pareto optimality.

PROBLEMS FOR EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

There are a number of other problems with the equal opportunity approach. One is that it implies results that are too callous. Consider Bert who recklessly drives a motorcycle without a helmet, is uninsured, and gets into an accident. Bert has no money to pay for the necessary life-saving operation. According to equal opportunity, Bert is fully responsible for his injury and so deserves no health care or transfer of funds. This result conflicts with our moral intuition that "however criminal or stupid his behavior may have been, there is a limit to the kind and amount of suffering he should endure." (P. 41.) One could argue that Bert should still receive some compensation for reasons of charity, but not under the norms of justice. However, this response ignores the fact that Bert has a basic need that demands ethical consideration.

Another problem is that individuals are constantly changing, and it is hard to bound them to consequences of earlier choices made with a different frame of mind. To make them suffer only the consequences of the virtual choices that they would have made in the past with their current frame of mind is overwhelmingly complex. This illustrates the fact that, in addition to non-separability difficulties or counter-intuitive implications, the apparently unbounded complexity of the equal opportunity approach makes it impossible to implement in the real world.

OUTCOME-SELECTIVE EGALITARIANISM

Given the inappropriateness of factor selective egalitarianism for global issues of distributive justice, let us return to a focus on egalitarian outcomes. To do this, it is useful to employ a particular concept of responsibility -- that which relates to the decisions allocated by society to its various members. "[T]he way I dress is my own daily responsibility. Probably my choice is influenced by many factors, including the remarks of my fellows, but whatever happens at the moment I pick my clothes from the closet, I remain, from the viewpoint of society, the decision maker in this domain." (P. 44.)

A society based on outcome-selective egalitarianism would design a set of institutions aiming at equality, across individuals, in the outcomes for which society assumes some responsibility, while not seeking, in this respect, to influence the outcomes that are the individual's responsibility. The relevant outcomes to be divided up between societal and individual responsibility would include, for example, "health, living standards, education level, career, family life, sense development, preference satisfaction, cheerfulness, etc.". (P. 45.)

Such an approach differs from factor-selective egalitarianism in a number of significant ways. For example, according to this approach, if cheerfulness is deemed a private matter, the person who is naturally sad, but otherwise leads a perfectly normal life, will not be compensated with any social resources. Similarly, the naturally cheerful person would not be penalized for this trait of personality. But if their social outcomes (job, income, family life, for instance) are affected, then social institutions may intervene. In contrast, since none of them has chosen to be sad or joyful, equal opportunity would immediately subsidize the former and tax the latter. (P. 52.)

An outcome-selective egalitarian principle does not require information on the causes of individual behavior (such as the distinction between talents and will). This avoids the practical difficulties of allocating subsidies according to whether a person was born with a special need (such as the born Muslim whose required trip to Mecca might be subsidized) or choose it for herself (e.g., an individual who converted to Islam, knowing the cost of travel to Mecca, and is therefore responsible for paying the full fare). This makes outcome-selective egalitarianism much easier to apply, since outcomes are more easily observed than causal factors.

A source of difference between the two approaches is the type of responsibility emphasized in each. Factor-selective egalitarianism in effect assumes free will, and gives rewards and punishments for choices freely made. Outcome-selective egalitarianism does not have to grapple with free will, basing its allocations of social responsibility on the decision-making expectations

and powers described above as a practical (rather than a moral) responsibility. It gives people a substantial amount of choice without attaching thereto any moral desert. At the same time, social institutions retain the responsibility to fight against undesirable influences and provide individuals with good conditions within which to make their private choices

The effectiveness of outcome-selective egalitarianism depends largely upon how a society decides to divide responsibility between individuals and social institutions. An appropriate division would value autonomous choice, self-esteem and privacy, and would leave individuals with responsibility over their own goals and degrees of satisfaction. Most subjective outcomes would remain private, but their spillover effects upon society would be in the public domain. Thus subjective and intellectual outcomes would be private, but considerations of mental health and education level would be public. The life-style and consumption of individuals would be private, but institutions would be needed to circumscribe the externalities caused thereby.