The Tyranny of Equal Opportunity

by Theodore Dalrymple

I was in broad sympathy with Professor McGinnis's recent [*Law & Liberty* review](#) of Ingrid Robeyns's book, *Limitarianism: The Case Against Extreme Wealth*, though I am somewhat less sanguine than he about the benefits of wealth (beyond a certain level). I would put it like this: while increased wealth above a certain level is not guaranteed to increase happiness, or what is now routinely called *human flourishing*, attempts to limit wealth to that level are almost guaranteed to result in increased human *un*happiness.

I was struck, however, by the following sentence in the review:

> *While the left's interest in creating more equality of opportunity can be reconciled with liberalism's priority on human autonomy, Robeyns' contentions are deeply illiberal and depend on her own unimaginative prescriptions for human flourishing.*

I take it that this implies that equality of opportunity is, or would be, a desirable goal: but on the contrary, it seems

to me to be a terrible one, among the most terrible that could well be imagined. This is despite the fact that almost no one has a word to say against it. Equality of opportunity is as morally untouchable as grandmothers or kindness to animals.

In a sense, of course, we already have equality of opportunity. There are now no laws in any Western country to prevent anyone from pursuing any career merely by virtue of his or her birth or social origins, though increasingly we seem to be entering a semi-Stalinist world in which admission to certain positions or institutions is to be biassed in favour, and therefore also against, cherished or disfavoured social groups.

The formal equality of opportunity that we already have is the only form of it that is not inherently tyrannical. Nor is it *real*, *actual* equality of opportunity, since the life chances of people born in different circumstances are very different. This fact is not at all an argument against it, however, when one considers what real, actual equality of opportunity would entail.

In the first place, the complete absence of opportunity, provided it were evenly spread, would satisfy the demand for equality of opportunity. Perhaps it could never be *entirely* equal (someone would have to suppress all that opportunity, after all), but there is little doubt that, by comparison with our present situation, overall equality of opportunity would be increased by the maximal suppression of opportunity.

It is hardly to be supposed that anyone, except an aspiring totalitarian dictator, would want such a thing. But let us suppose that the person who believes in equality of opportunity wants an increase in overall opportunity for people, provided that it is spread à la John Rawls throughout society, in other words, that no gap in opportunity is thereby increased.

But how does inequality of opportunity arise? The first and most obvious cause is in genetic endowment. Differing genetic endowment is unfair, but not unjust. For example, I should like to have been born more handsome than I was, but there is no one I can blame for this unfortunate fact, and nothing that I can do about it. What goes for looks goes for other attributes too numerous to mention.

For what is mere opportunity as a goal when compared to equality of opportunity? Have we no ambition?

There is no way this genetic unfairness can be abolished, except by universal cloning to ensure that all start with the same genetic endowment. From the point of equality of opportunity, it does not matter whether that endowment is good or bad, for everyone would be in the same genetic boat.

But mere genetic equality, while necessary, would not be sufficient. The precise contribution of genes to human conduct, and therefore to human fate, is a matter of continuing dispute. Still, not even the most dyed-in-the-wool believer in genetic determinism would claim that nothing but the genes counted in carving a person's path in, or through, life. The environment counts for something: the fact that English is my mother tongue is attributable to the environment in which I was raised. Not that linguistic determinism is ironclad either, for some of the greatest writers in English and French in the twentieth century did not have English or French as their native languages.

Still, it is pretty clear that home and surrounding neighbourhood environments have a large influence on a person's trajectory. Again, nothing is cast in stone, and many great people have managed to overcome the greatest disadvantages. Still, suppose you are ambitious to succeed in some sphere or other. In that case, it is obviously better or easier to have been born in one environment rather than

another (indeed, the ambition itself might be in part the product of an environment).

Which environment a person is born into is a matter of chance, from the point of view of that person's responsibility for it. Thus, we are horrified to learn that, not so very long ago, illegitimate children were blamed for their own illegitimacy, as if their moral responsibility stretched backwards to the time before they were conceived.

It is certainly not fair that some people are born into nurturing environments and others into the very opposite. Moreover, it is possible that if environments could be to some degree equalised, marginal differences would become more important. The only way to avoid the unfairness caused by environmental differences is to make the environment in which children are raised (now clones, of course) absolutely identical in all respects, the equivalent of a battery farm. Only thus can the famous level playing field be achieved. Such an upbringing, of course, would make North Korea seem like a school for individuality.

Since this is the only meaning that can be given to equality of opportunity, other than the formal legal equality that we already enjoy, it is clear that practically no one means equality of opportunity when he uses the phrases to denote a desired goal. He is, no doubt unwittingly, merely signaling his democratic benevolence in general, not enunciating something to be aimed at.

On the other hand, it ought to be possible to provide every child with opportunity, though not *equal* opportunity, for example by instituting good schools that nurture talent and build character. How this is best done is a matter of trial and error, and of experience. No system will ever be so perfect that "no child will be left behind," to use the cant phrase. But while trying to provide opportunity for every child suggests practical solutions, aiming for something

impossible like equality of opportunity supplies an excellent alibi for failure to do whatever is truly possible to give every child opportunity: for what is mere opportunity as a goal when compared to equality of opportunity? Have we no ambition?

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