



Defending equality of outcome

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Defending Equality of Outcome

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Two themes have become part of the common-sense in current thinking about equality. The first is that defining equality in terms of outcome – equalising where people end up rather than where or how they begin – displays a distressing lack of sophistication. Such a definition immediately begs the question of what we are seeking to equalise (income? happiness? welfare?), and seems to forget that measures to deliver equality on one of these metrics will deliver inequality on another. Equalising resources notoriously overlooks the diversity of preferences and tastes: since what people want varies enormously, any strict division of the world's resources will leave each of us with an excess of what we consider worthless and probably too little of what we really desire. Yet if we turn instead to equalising people's sense of well-being, we may end up giving more to the constitutionally dissatisfied than to the easily content. Defining equality in terms of outcome presumes an easy answer to the 'equality of what?' conundrum, gliding over complex issues of what equality means.

Equalising outcomes is also said to deny the importance of individual responsibility and choice. If one person chooses to postpone early chances of earning in order to get more qualifications, why should we object if he later earns a higher wage than his peers? If another gives up on exotic holidays in order to take out a mortgage, how can we object if she ends up with better accommodation than her more frivolous

friends? People should surely carry the consequences of (at least some of) their actions; this being so, it cannot be appropriate to regard **any** inequality of outcome as evidence of social injustice.

In both academic and popular discourse, the pursuit of outcome equality has been regarded as a politics of envy, an attack on anyone whose aspirations or achievements stray above a supposed norm. (Consider Jan Narveson's comment: 'Egalitarianism forces persons who exceed the average, in the respect deemed by the theorist to be relevant, to surrender, insofar as possible, the amount by which they exceed that average to persons below it.'ⁱ) Politicians have been particularly down on the politics of envy, and mostly opt for what they see as the less controversial equality of opportunity: of course people should not expect to end up with the same bundle of commodities or same level of happiness, but it is fair enough that they should expect to have the same opportunities to thrive. Equality of opportunity is then set up as the mild-mannered alternative to the craziness of outcome equality, though in the academic literature, these opportunities have been ratcheted up to include some pretty substantial material conditions. There are still theorists around who specify equality of opportunity in the most minimal of ways – who will say that opportunities are equal, for example, so long as there is no overt discrimination on the grounds of gender or race, or no legal impediment that prevents anyone from entering the race – but the more characteristic move today is to distinguish between the illegitimate inequalities that arise from circumstances beyond our control and those legitimate ones that arise from the exercise of personal choice. This delivers a pretty testing notion of equality of opportunity that takes issue with a large range of 'bad luck' scenarios: the bad luck of being born with a physical condition that significantly

affects one's health or employment opportunities; the bad luck of being born into a family with very limited financial resources; and for an increasing number of theorists, also the bad luck of being born with less talent and thus less of an opportunity to thrive.

This last, in particular, has significantly raised the stakes for equality of opportunity, leading to the thesis that those less favoured by nature should be 'compensated' for their lesser abilities and talent. (In most cases, this is understood as a justification for some level of redistributive taxation.) But putting more content into equal opportunities has been linked to an even firmer dismissal of equal outcomes, for if we really did manage to ensure that all individuals had the same opportunities – and failing that, managed to compensate the unfortunates whose opportunities can never be so good – we should be reasonably confident that any remaining inequalities had come about through the exercise of individual choice. Requiring all individuals to have the same chances is one thing, but expecting them to have the same success rates is said to be quite another. If one person likes to make money while another prefers to go surfing all day, then so be it: why should we expect both to end up with the same level of resources regardless of their personal choice?

The related theme (more prominent in academic than popular discourse) is that money is much over-rated, and that equalising the distribution of income and wealth addresses only one of many things that matter. Ronald Dworkin, for example, argues that the obsession with an after-the-event money equality discounts the choices people have made about what to do with their resources, and that while the distribution of goods should be made less sensitive to differences in endowment, it is entirely right and proper that it should reflect the different decisions we make about our lives. A key element in his

argument is that nobody wants to be poor but not everyone wants to be rich. The idea that the best life is the life dedicated to the accumulation of wealth or consumption of luxuries comes, Dworkin says, ‘as close as any theory of the good life to naked absurdity’.ⁱⁱ Some of us set more store by having time to read or laze in the sun; some want to devote their lives to making music or creating works of beauty; and as my seventeen year old son repeatedly points out, some care more about having a supportive network of friends than being able to earn pots of money.

It would be odd to insist that all individuals have the same number of books to read or take the same number of foreign holidays regardless of how much they value either. Equalising income looks at first glance the answer to this problem, for if we were all guaranteed the same amount of money, we could then make our own choices about how to spend it. But while this might work as a case for equalising starting points, it is clearly inappropriate when applied to outcomes. People do not vary just in the commodities they value; they also have different preferences over the distribution of their time between work and leisure, or their energies between making things themselves and consuming what others have produced. Given this, it would seem equally odd to insist that everyone devotes the same proportion of her life to accumulating money. Dworkin suggests that we apply the ‘envy-test’ to work out whether a particular distribution is fair: would you swop what you have for someone else’s combination? Most of us have our moments of envying those richer than ourselves, but that doesn’t necessarily mean we would be prepared to make an exchange. British academics, for example, are notoriously grumpy about the salary scales in higher education, but what most of us would like is to

keep the jobs we do and be paid more for them. We don't envy the others enough to give up on those aspects of our work that we value.

The other side to this is that the amount of money we have access to can be a poor indicator of the quality of our life. As Amartya Sen has argued, the ability to convert incomes into opportunities is affected by a multiplicity of individual and social differences that mean some people will need more than others to achieve the same range of capabilities. 'Differences in age, gender, special talents, disability, proneness to illness, and so on can make two different persons have quite divergent opportunities of quality of life **even when** they share exactly the same commodity bundle.'ⁱⁱⁱ If you are confined to a wheelchair, for example, you will need more resources (at a minimum, the wheelchair) to reach levels of mobility others can take for granted. Or if you live in Los Angeles, you may find it virtually impossible to function without a car: what would be a luxury commodity in another circumstances may there be a necessity of life. Income levels only tell part of the story; what matters is not what resources we have, but what whatever we have enables us to do.

As the above suggests, many of today's arguments knit together the over-rating of money with the over-rating of outcome to stress issues of agency and empowerment. As Sen puts it, we should be focusing on people as agents rather than as patients, and therefore as individuals with very different ideas about the outcomes they will choose to pursue. And while the lack of money is one crucial constraint on these pursuits, there are equally compelling ones that arise from social and political relations: the denial of political rights, for example, that can make it impossible for people to exert their political agency; the constraining effects of cultural traditions on women's possibilities for action;

or the widespread failure of social provision for education or health. This suggests a more ambitious understanding of welfare than is indicated in policies that deal exclusively with income or level of resources, and directs us to wider questions about what enables people to develop as autonomous beings. Has the educational system, for example, enabled them to stretch their imaginations and develop their full potential? Does the political system enable them to participate actively in public life? And of particular relevance when it comes to the empowerment of women, do the relations inside the family enable some to flourish while condemning others to conditions of dependency?

Feminism, income, and outcome

A number of these arguments coincide with ones that have been prominent through the feminist literature, but others pull in a very different direction. The idea that money is not all that matters – or to put it even more strongly, that one could enjoy an abundance of material possessions but still suffer acute deprivation in agency and power – has been a persistent feminist theme. This was particularly so in the formative years of the nineteenth century, when so many women were constrained by the gendered expectations of their class, and ‘working lady’ became virtually a contradiction in terms. In her early thirties, just as she was embarking on the nursing career that so horrified her family, Florence Nightingale wrote an impassioned denunciation of the life of the society lady, deprived of any occupation for her body or intellect and suffocated by her wealthy existence.

To have no food for our heads, no food for our hearts, no food for our activity, is that nothing? If we have no food for the body, how do we cry out, how all the world hears of it, how all the newspapers talk of it, with a paragraph headed in

great capital letters, DEATH FROM STARVATION! But suppose one were to put a paragraph in the *Times*, Death of Thought from Starvation, or Death of Moral Activity from Starvation, how people would stare, how they would laugh and wonder! One would think we had no heads or hearts by the total indifference of the public toward them.^{iv}

This sense of deprivation in the midst of plenty echoed a contrast Mary Wollstonecraft made in the 1790s between the heroism of those poorer women who enjoyed few advantages of education but had the dignity and independence of working for their keep, and the idle decadence of middle class women taught to think only of the ‘frippery of dress’.^v With marriage as the main route to financial security, middle class women were not only economically but emotionally dependent on men: they derived their self-esteem from how others viewed them rather than how they viewed themselves, and made their way through flirtation and cunning. The preening and manipulation might be attended by great success – a woman might capture a wealthy husband and never suffer material want – but the price for this was a stunted moral and physical development. Measured in terms of income, such women could hardly complain of inequality; indeed if the men worked while the women did nothing, the inequity might seem to be on the other side. Measured in terms of capabilities, however, such women were confined and constrained and denied.

The idea that money is not everything resonates strongly with feminist arguments. In contrast, however, to those who link the over-rating of income with the over-emphasis on outcome, feminists have also tended to think of equality of outcome as a key measure of sexual equality. Part of the background to this is the rather disreputable history of the notion that the two sexes can be equal though different: a notion much loved in the age of

‘separate spheres’, when it was employed to justify women’s exclusion from the suffrage or to explain why they could so usefully serve in local government but would be tarnished by the right to vote in national elections. The celebration of maternal instinct has been periodically wheeled out to justify male incompetence in caring for children, references to ‘nimble fingers’ are employed to explain women’s concentration in certain sectors of industry, while their supposedly superior capacity for inter-personal relations makes them just perfect for social work. Feminists haven’t always refused the idea of equal though different, and when confronted with the prospect of mimicking the worst aspects of masculine existence – high octane aggression, or never seeing your children from first thing in the morning till last thing at night –many have backed away from notions of ‘strict’ equality. Some then argue that desegregation is less urgent than the reevaluation of women’s work or women’s qualities, so rather than insisting that men and women should be equally represented in all occupations and roles, they may argue for a shift in social priorities and values that recognises the equal importance of what women do. But more commonly, the critique of ‘masculine models’ of employment or rationality has generated an argument for convergence. Both sexes should be able to strike a new balance between work life and family; or both sexes should be able to moderate the strictness of impartial justice with the compassion of care.

In such arguments, equality is understood very much in outcome terms, though with outcome significantly broadened to include occupations, activities, and responsibilities as well as the distribution of income and wealth. The crucial move is the claim that equality of opportunity is a chimera if it has not generated equality of outcome in these fields. If the result of all our disparate choices and opportunities is that men

nonetheless congregate in the higher echelons of the economy, predominate in positions of political influence, sweep up all the literary prizes, and never collect the children from school, the presumption must be that the opportunities were not so equal. We can judge, that is, the extent of the equality by checking on the results, and should be reluctant to credit an initial equality of opportunity if the outcomes prove so dissimilar.

The argument I pursue in this paper is that equality of outcome – measured here not in the ideologically loaded terms of preference satisfaction nor in the narrower metric of income and wealth, but across the broad spectrum of resources, occupations, and roles - has to be taken as a key measure of equality of opportunity.^{vi} When differences of outcome are explained retrospectively by reference to differences in personal preference, this assumes what has to be demonstrated: that individuals really did have equal opportunities to thrive. In many cases, moreover, these explanations reproduce ideologically suspect stereotypes about particular social groups: that ‘women’ for example, care more about children than men, or have less of a taste for political power. When outcomes are ‘different’ (read unequal), the better explanation is that the opportunities were themselves unequal. There is room for a stronger argument that presents equality of outcome as itself an intrinsic good, and I note some cases where I believe this to apply. But even if we leave aside this stronger argument, outcome equality cannot be regarded as the crazy alternative to equal opportunities. These are not opposing conceptions of equality, but on the contrary, closely linked.

Equality of outcome 1: gender, ‘race’, and political representation

I approach this in three stages of increasing difficulty. The first relates to issues of political representation, and reasons for thinking that systems of representation should

deliver an **equal** outcome between women and men, and a **proportionate** outcome (roughly in line, that is, with proportions in the voting population) for ethnic and racial groups.^{vii} Though now so unfashionable in other contexts, the idea that equality should be measured in outcomes as well as opportunities is widely canvassed in relation to political representation. As the sorry statistics of women's under-representation in politics demonstrate, the equal right to vote and stand for election does not translate in any automatic way into parity between the sexes; nor does the enfranchisement of ethnic and racial minorities guarantee that individuals from these groups will be elected to political office. Where the imbalance stems from overt discrimination, all good democrats will recognise an illegitimate inequality. No-one would claim that opportunities were equal if selection committees refused to interview female candidates or rejected anyone with a foreign-sounding name: that kind of overt discrimination is out of order on any understanding of equality of opportunity. But when political parties take the further step of introducing regulations to ensure an equitable distribution between men and women, or white people and black, they step over into a discourse about equality of outcome.

A surprising number have taken this step (though much more commonly in relation to gender than race): witness the extensive reliance across the world on quota arrangements requiring parties to field a minimum number of women candidates; or the UK Labour Party's use of all-women short lists in the run up to the 1997 election; or the recent 'parite' legislation in France that requires parties to field equal numbers of men and women in their electoral lists.^{viii} The aim of such initiatives is to guarantee not just equality of opportunity but equality of outcome as well. More precisely, perhaps, those

who have campaigned for these changes argue that there is no real gap between these two. If the outcome is a disproportionate number of white, male representatives, then the opportunities were clearly not equal.

Part of what is being claimed in this argument is that a disparity arising from overt discrimination should not be regarded as significantly different from one that arises out of structural constraints. There is nothing particularly mysterious about the under-representation of women in politics, for in societies still shaped by a male breadwinner model and still requiring women to shoulder the bulk of care responsibilities, it is entirely predictable that more men will be available for a full time political career. Men will be more concentrated in the occupations that tend to lead to political life, and will be perceived as more authoritative than women in speaking on public affairs. Women, meanwhile, will be less confident in putting themselves forward and more easily discouraged by perceptions of politics as a man's world. The parallel under-representation of people from an ethnic or racial minority owes quite a lot to direct racism, but here too there will be seemingly 'objective' differences in educational and employment histories or length of time spent in mainstream politics. These socially constructed differences – themselves expressions of inequality – can be as important in their effects as overt discrimination; you don't have to hypothesise all men as sexist pigs or all white people as racists to explain the continuing under-representation of women and ethnic minorities.

The case for parity of representation between women and men, or proportionality according to ethnicity and race, depends in part on breaking down the distinction between overt discrimination and structural constraint. To say this is not to say there are no

differences: aside from anything else, it is usually easier to tackle overt discrimination than to engage with structural differences that run through the entire organisation of social life. Societies can make discrimination illegal, but they are unlikely to make it a criminal offence for couples to arrange their lives according to a male breadwinner/female dependant model. There are no great resource implications (beyond perhaps some minor monitoring costs) in requiring selection committees to abide by non-discriminatory practices, but it would involve a major commitment of public funds to tackle occupational segregation by gender and race, or make good quality child care fully available to all. Many people, moreover, would say that actively discriminating against someone is more morally reprehensible than being part of a social arrangement that has the effect of keeping people out, for while we can change our own practices, we may have little influence on wider social arrangements. Such differences are not negligible, but they do not mean that overt discrimination is the only thing that should bother us. Where there is a marked variance between the gender and ethnic composition of the voting population and the gender and ethnic composition of their political representatives, something is skewing the results.

If nothing were stopping people, if nothing got in their way, we would expect a roughly random distribution of political office and influence among all citizens: no marked preponderance of people with blue eyes, no marked under-representation of those with short hair. The only legitimate discrepancies would be those that mapped on to politically salient characteristics, so we wouldn't be surprised if our political representatives turned out to be more literate or articulate than the average citizen, in fact we'd probably be rather relieved. But we would – or at least should – be surprised if they

turned out to be more male or more white, for why would either gender or 'race' be associated with whatever the society has come to regard as relevant political attributes? Failing some weird stretch of DNA that attaches sex and race to the capacity to make speeches or deliberate on public affairs, the only explanation for under-representation is that something is blocking the way. At this point, it isn't hugely significant whether the obstacle is a male conspiracy to exclude women or the sexual division of labour: whichever it is, there is some illegitimate process of exclusion. The outcome then becomes the measure of the opportunities, for if the outcome is not equal, we can be reasonably certain that the opportunities were not so.

The above argument takes equality of opportunity as the primary objective, but treats equality of outcome as the test for identifying whether the objective is achieved. Because what is at issue here is the distribution of political office, we can in this case add a further argument that presents equality of outcome as an intrinsically desirable goal. Implausible as it is to treat gender or 'race' as good indicators of the capacity to engage in politics, there is an important sense in which these **are** politically salient characteristics when it comes to choosing political representatives. Representatives are not chosen on the basis of a politically neutral list of abilities – a selection process that could generate a chamber of identikit politicians, all scoring equally on their verbal and written skills – but because they are felt to represent voters' experiences, interests and views. Closeness of fit matters in this. In my view, this implies not only a reasonable match in terms of political ideas and policy objectives but also a good fit in characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and 'race'. A decision-making chamber that acts for both sexes but is composed exclusively of one cannot be described as representative; nor can one that legislates for an

ethnically diverse community but draws its representatives from only one group. Where the nature of representation is at issue, equality of outcome is not just a way of scrutinising the claims of equal opportunity. It becomes an important objective in itself.

The case for the above depends on various sub-theses about the relationship between people's life-experiences, priorities and judgements that I have developed elsewhere^{ix}; and involves the (surely plausible) claim that a person's understanding of political issues and priorities – as well as willingness to advocate particular courses of action – will be influenced by his/her location in the social hierarchy. (At its simplest, those who have experienced a particular form of discrimination are likely to see things others will miss.) I shall not rehearse these arguments here, but for present purposes shall simply assert that the gender and ethnic composition of any body of representatives is an important measure of whether that body is indeed 'representative'; and that when there are considerable differences of experience attached to being male or female, white or black, in an ethnic majority or ethnic minority, these differences should be reflected in any decision-making body.

This delivers a rather neat argument to the effect that the outcomes would be much the same between both sexes and across all ethnic groups if there were no significant differences between them; since the outcomes are not the same, there clearly **are** differences, and therefore the outcomes ought to be more equal. The fact that there is an under-representation of certain groups already establishes that they must be differently positioned within society. It must be that certain groups have less access than others to education; or are concentrated in occupations that make it harder for them to enter politics; or are so busy bringing up children they never get to political meetings; or are

simply regarded as inferior beings who cannot be trusted with a representative's job. These differences must be quite large, large enough to explain what is a significant under-representation, and if there are such differences in people's lives, it becomes that much less plausible to say that all groups are equally well represented when only one of a variety of groups exerts a monopoly over political life. Either we are sufficiently similar in our concerns and interests and experiences for the sex or ethnicity of our representatives to be irrelevant –in which case, the similarities in our lives would already throw up a rough parity in representation. Or we are in truth very differently situated, in which case there is a compelling political argument for ensuring not just a formal equality of chances but equal outcomes as well.

Equality of outcome 2: gender, 'race' and the social division of labour

The second question – at an increasing level of difficulty - is whether these arguments also apply to an equal distribution in terms of income, occupations, responsibilities and time. Everyone would presumably agree that sexual equality means no discrimination against women, no barriers that prevent them pursuing the same kind of opportunities and careers as men, and equal payment when they do the same kind of work. But does equality additionally mean that men and women should be distributed in equal numbers across all occupations and income brackets – equal numbers in engineering and nursing, equal numbers in the board room and cleaning the offices at night? Does it mean **no** sexual division of labour, no difference between the sexes in the balance they strike between work life and family, no difference in the proportion of their lives they devote to caring for the young, sick and old? By the same token, racial equality is widely understood to mean equal opportunities for all regardless of skin colour and ethnic origin,

and surely implies equal pay for equal work. Does it also mean there should be no variation between ethnic groups in the kinds of work they do – so to take stereotypical examples from the UK, no over-representation of Asians among those running corner shops, no under-representation of African-Caribbeans in academic jobs? The issues parallel those that arise in relation to political representation, revolving around the distinction, if any, between overt discrimination and the less direct but pervasive barriers that arise from past history and present social arrangements. However, the counter-argument about choice is often felt to be stronger here, for while it is hard to believe that one group would deliberately choose to have less political influence than another, it may be more plausible to think its members would choose a different life-style or set of occupations.

In **Culture and Equality**, Brian Barry detects an inconsistency in multicultural arguments for proportionality, arguing that one cannot simultaneously say that cultural differences should be recognised and supported, and yet that no consequences should flow from this. One cannot, that is, take liberal societies to task for failing to acknowledge cultural diversity, and yet continue to think it inherently unfair and oppressive if one aspect of this cultural diversity ‘is that members of different groups tend to cluster in different occupations by choice’.^x If Sikhs, for example, are to be encouraged in their cultural difference by legislation that exempts them from regulations requiring motor-cyclists or construction workers to wear protective helmets, we can hardly be surprised if they exhibit their cultural difference by preferring one kind of work over another. ‘Equal outcomes can be secured only by departing from equal opportunities

so as to impose equal success rates for all groups. A culturally diverse society cannot be conceived as one in which everyone is trying equally hard to achieve the same goals'.^{xi}

To my mind, Barry falls into another kind of inconsistency, for he simultaneously wants to play down the significance of cultural difference (viewing it as a mistaken label for what are more commonly differences of class) while still relying on it to explain occupational segregation; but he does have a good point here. If there is indeed some 'cultural' difference that draws certain groups disproportionately into higher education and others into the construction industry, it would be weird to present this outcome as at odds with equality; and particularly weird if one also believed that cultural diversity was a positive feature of contemporary life. The problem, however, with invocations of cultural difference is that they risk re-cycling tired stereotypes about cultural groups, and often rely on what Uma Narayan has characterised as a 'package picture of cultures' that underestimates the porosity of cultural boundaries and overestimates the homogeneity of each cultural group.^{xii} It would be intellectually arrogant to dismiss the possibility of cultural difference, but when documented differences in occupations, life-styles or income are explained backwards by reference to presumed differences in preferences and tastes, this closes a circle that should be re-opened.

Where there are known inequalities in background conditions, the burden of proof lies with those who proclaim 'difference' rather than inequality as the cause. In most cases, alternative explanations for occupational or educational diversity spring readily to mind: thus that groups facing employment discrimination will set particularly high store by the educational qualifications that could cancel out the effects of racism, or will find more ready and secure chances of employment if they seek out occupations dominated by

members of their own ethnic group, or will have more chance of avoiding employer discrimination if they chance their hand in the small business sector. The choices migrants, for example, make do not reflect some 'pure' set of cultural preferences; in most cases they involve a pragmatic adjustment to an often unwelcoming environment that had made some options more attractive than others.

In relation to gender, it is frequently said that men and women want different things: at its starkest, that the reason we have a sexual division of labour is that women have a higher preference for children. Women may, that is, have a different scale of values – and if so, why should we require strict parity between the sexes as a condition for gender equality? Barry takes up Iris Young's suggestion that a disproportionality between the sexes in positions of high status is *prima facie* evidence of discrimination. Well, maybe, he responds, maybe it does indicate that the society has denied women equal opportunities with men. But what if women were just as highly educated and qualified as men, 'but disproportionately chose to devote their lives to activities incompatible with reaching the top of a large corporation'^{xiii}, what if there was just a different distribution between the sexes of achievement-oriented dispositions? The answer, of course, is that there **is** a different distribution, as there has to be given current social structures. Somebody has to devote her life to these activities that are incompatible with reaching the top of a large corporation, somebody has to make sure that the children are fed and clothed and get their homework done in time, and since no society has yet organised itself so that these activities can be shared equally between women and men, it's a fortunate fact of life that many women actively volunteer. To take this, however, as evidence that the distribution of caring and achievement orientations is intrinsically

linked to sex is to presume in advance that the causation goes one way. It is far more plausible, in my view, to see it as evidence that people accommodate themselves to whatever they perceive as the options before them. As Roemer puts it in a related argument: ‘preferences are often adjusted to what the person falsely deems to be necessary, and society does her no favour by accepting the consequences that follow from exercising them.’^{xiv}

When contesting the legal restrictions that denied women access to the full range of educational and employment opportunities, John Stuart Mill argued that we could not know what women wanted or were able to do until they were given the same opportunities as men.^{xv} He hoped and suspected that women **would** have different dispositions and that most of them would seek their fulfilment within the family; and he spent much of his energy exposing the brutalities and inequalities in the family that currently made this such an unattractive option. But Mill still focused more narrowly on examples of overt discrimination, and this meant he did not engage with the wider social and institutional arrangements that also affect what women wanted or were able to do: what provisions, if any, are made for childcare, whether the length and patterns of the working day are compatible with all adult members of a household being in paid employment, and whether the culture and ethos of particular occupations has been cast in an exclusionary masculine mould. Once we add these in, it becomes clear that we are still a long way from the circumstances in which women and men could be said to choose ‘freely’ according to their dispositions; we still cannot say what women want and whether what they want differs systematically from men.

In the case of gender, I happen to think that equality of outcome is an intrinsically desirable goal, and that our lives would be both richer and freer if there were no significant difference between the sexes in the distribution of income or time or roles. But the argument does not depend on that quirk of my personality. For both gender and culture, we must leave it as an open possibility that there **are** different scales of value or different attitudes to material success: to return to one of the opening points, money is not all that matters, and it may be that groups differ precisely in their estimation of its worth. But treating either 'women' or 'cultural groups' as homogenous entities, characterised by some core values that set them apart from 'men' and other 'cultural groups', is theoretically suspect and empirically plausible. When there is, in addition, an abundance of alternative explanations for differential success rates - histories of educational disadvantage, the association of certain categories of work with certain categories of people, racism, sexism, inadequate childcare provision, work patterns shaped around the expectation that each worker has a wife at home –the safer bet is to work on the assumption that all groups would normally have the same rate of success. Where this fails to materialise, it is likely that something is blocking the way. The implication, to repeat, is that we can only be confident that opportunities were equal when the outcome is equal too. Any systematic disparity in outcomes – whether this be a concentration of certain groups at certain points of the social hierarchy or a marked segregation of occupations and roles - alerts us to a likely inequality in initial opportunities. (This is indeed the standard presumption in studies of racial or sexual discrimination, where an under- or over-representation in particular categories of work is usually taken as *prima facie*

evidence of discrimination, even if there is no supporting material documenting deliberate exclusion.)

Equality of outcome 3: from groups to individuals?

This brings me to the third level of difficulty, which is whether there is a case for measuring equality by outcome that extends beyond the possibly special cases of gender, ethnicity and 'race'. Despite my scepticism about whether systematic differences of ability or disposition can be mapped onto these particular categories, I am not so naïve as to doubt the existence of individual difference. Individuals vary in their abilities, characters, and dispositions, and though the variance is often exaggerated by social and educational inequalities, people are indeed different in what they want and are able to do. Most of us, moreover, retain a strong attachment to the notion of personal responsibility. We believe that people should think about the consequences of their actions for their own lives and the lives of others; and parents endlessly tell their children that they cannot continue to rely on someone else to do things for them but will at some point have to assume responsibility for themselves. Even when we think that the penalties have been set too high –that people pay too high a price in cumulative disadvantage, for example, for the easily made mistakes of their younger years – we mostly want to hold on to some notion of personal responsibility. That being so, we seem to be committed to some significant differences in outcome, between individuals if not social groups.

In the more comforting scenarios, these differences are simply that: differences not inequalities. Thus one person might get most satisfaction from engaging in some creative activity (painting, say, or writing, or playing the cello), might regard material possessions as an oppression, and career progression as just a form of self-importance.

The dedicated artist would experience no sense of inequity when watching her contemporaries climb the career ladder, accumulate possessions, and establish their authority over subordinates they can boss around, for none of these would hold any attraction for her. She would, if anything, feel mildly sorry for friends who had chosen that route. Another person might like the challenge of a physically testing and even dangerous job, and he too might feel mildly sorry for those who contented themselves with the safety of an office routine.^{xvi} Yet another might regard work as nothing more than a source of income, wouldn't expect to gain any intrinsic satisfaction from her paid employment, and would be happy with the most tedious work so long as it generated enough money to pay the bills. There might be very significant differences between these characters in terms of income, social status, their chances of industrial injury, or the intrinsic satisfaction they gain from their work, but since each has positively chosen a particular combination, we need not describe these as inequalities.

I have argued that invocations of 'difference' should be treated with caution when they are employed to explain the positioning of social groups within the social division of labour or the distribution of income and wealth; and that group disparities are better regarded as a prima facie indication that opportunities are not yet equal. When it comes to variations between individuals, it seems inappropriate to insist on the same level of scepticism. Market considerations aside (I am aware this is a large caveat!), the one compelling argument against outcome equality is that it fails to take account of differences in aspirations and dispositions. This is indeed compelling when we are dealing with individual differences alone. It is hard to say what equality of outcome could mean when applied to the diversity of individual destinations: it surely cannot mean

providing each person with the same bundle of goods and activities, because we do not all value the same combination: and it cannot even mean providing each person with the same amount of money, because we do not all value money in the same way. When dealing with social groups, the variations are more easily averaged out, and it becomes inherently suspicious to attribute systematic differences in outcome to the different mindsets of different groups: this begs too many questions about why the members of one group might have ended up with a radically different set of preferences to another; and overlooks much we already know about the different conditions under which their choices were made. Outcome arguments make most sense when applied to the distribution of resources and activities between social groups. The issue, then, is not whether we can extend outcome arguments to apply also to the distribution of resources and activities between individuals, but whether current thinking misrepresents the effects of social relations and institutions as if these were generated by individual choice.

My own view is that this misrepresentation is rife in the contemporary literature on inequality. In recent years, political philosophers have conjured up a large cast of contrasting individuals around which to build their stories of equality, responsibility or choice: the connoisseur of fine wines who would be deeply unhappy if forced to drink vin ordinaire^{xvii}; the man obsessed with photography who has to spend so much more to satisfy his tastes than his counterpart who loves fishing^{xviii}; the artist who chooses creativity over material possessions. Though this is rarely the explicit intention, the effect is encourage us to think that our chance talents and aspirations really do explain how and where we end up. This draws us into a discourse of individual variation that has less and less purchase on the larger issues of inequality: in a world where the 300 wealthiest

individuals control assets equivalent to those of the poorest three billion, the distribution of resources is clearly about something more than the distribution of tastes or talents or the propensity for hard work.

There are many ways in which current writing on inequality understates the impact of social relations and structures, and I note here just three of the more obvious ones. First, the aspirations that shape our choices are themselves framed by our social location, most notably and persistently, by the impact of social class. British studies of the relationship between class of origin, educational achievements, and class of destination demonstrate an astonishingly persistent correlation despite all the changes of the last hundred years^{xix}: we could attribute this to genetic inheritance; we might, more plausibly, stress the inequities in educational provision between fee-paying and state schools, and between state schools in rich and poor neighbourhoods; but educational experts have also highlighted the transmission of aspirations from parents to children, and the way our perceptions of what we might do reflect what our parents have done before us. The choices we make about our lives do not arise out of some pure ether. They are constrained by the resources available to us (which is, of course, addressed in the literature) but also by the ways in which our preferences and ambitions are formed.

A second problem is that the outcome of these choices depends in large part on the chances of what our society now values. We might, for example, make an eminently sensible set of choices in acquiring particular qualifications and skills, but then find that the twists and turns of the world economy have made these redundant. Or we might have skills that would have been much appreciated in another era, but be unlucky enough to live through times that attach more weight to something else. Or indeed we might have

skills that **are** appreciated as crucial to the quality of life (I would put teaching in this category, caring for the young, sick and elderly, maintaining public parks and leisure facilities), but find through the ‘accidents’ of current social arrangements that these are organised through a poorly resourced public sector that cannot reward them in any substantial way. From a market perspective, the resulting inequalities are entirely fair: if you have what someone with money will pay for, then of course you’ll do better than the rest. In terms of social justice, however, the unequal rewards attached to our different endeavours look pretty arbitrary. There is something rather shady about attributing to personal choice what turn out to be vast differences in social standing and income, when the choices were about a particular use of one’s talents, not the relative social standing of nursing and banking.

A third problem is that the choices we make tend to have a cumulative effect that can lead to outcomes none of us deliberately chose. Faced by unexpected illness, for example, or the approach of old age, our impoverished but previously happy artist may find that the choices she made between creativity and material security now have particularly dire consequences. It would be possible, but in my view very punitive, to say that she ought to have thought of all this before: we don’t always think through all the possible consequences of our actions, or may be unaware that social provision is inadequate to cover essential needs; or may have been unlucky enough to make our choices in one period and then find that social provision is significantly reduced. When the outcomes of our choices are ones that no rational person would deliberately seek, it seems inappropriate to insist on these as just the consequences of personal choice.^{xx}

All these cast doubt on that benign scenario that sees differences in outcome flowing fairly and freely from the exercise of individual choice, and they do so in large part by reminding us that much of what is theorised as an effect of individual diversity is sustained by social structures of inequality. Egalitarians know this well enough, but the connections have been obscured in recent literature. Ironically, this is partly because of the very radicalism of the arguments about what we can be said to deserve. Luck and choice have emerged as the two main variables dictating the distribution of resources, and this has delivered a far more testing notion of equal opportunities than is commonly found in the discourse of politicians. If individuals cannot be said to ‘deserve’ the advantages that flow to them through their chance location in the social hierarchy, there must also, we are told, be a question mark over whether they deserve the benefits that flow to them by virtue of their ‘natural’ abilities and talents. These are, as we so often say, gifts: things that come to us through no intrinsic merit of our own but through our good fortune in the natural lottery. If we do not think that social contingencies justify a moral claim to more or better goods, why should we think natural contingencies justify one person having more than another? ‘From a moral standpoint’, as John Rawls famously put it, ‘the two seem equally arbitrary.’^{xxi}

Much of the impetus behind the luck/choice distinction was to expose the similarities between being denied opportunities because of unfavourable social circumstances and being denied them because of one’s ‘natural’ inheritance: the key issue then is not whether it was social circumstance or individual abilities that brought you to your current pre-eminence, but whether it was luck or choice. This generates a strong basis for taxing the working rich as well as the rentiers, and has provided political

theorists with much-needed resources for querying the claims of superior talent. But in closing the gap between social and natural circumstances, it has also turned attention away from the structures that generate and sustain inequality. It has re-defined what is predominantly a problem of inter-group relations – the inequalities between rich and poor, male and female, black and white – as a conundrum about luck and choice. One consequence, as Elizabeth Anderson has noted, is that '(r)ecent egalitarian thinking has come to be dominated by the view that the fundamental aim of equality is to compensate people for undeserved bad luck'^{xxii}; this promotes an essentially individualist understanding of equality that threatens to lose sight of oppressions that are socially imposed.

The cause of the bad luck becomes incidental. It no longer matters much whether it arose from genetic disorder, from racism or sexism, or the rules governing the inheritance of money; and since the cause of the bad luck is no longer the issue, there is less interest in identifying which ones are open to structural change. Yet throwing everything that cannot be attributed to the effects of individual choice into a residual category of 'luck' does little to advance our understanding of the causes of inequality, and 'bad luck' is a distinctly odd way of describing the social relations and institutions that structure and constrain our lives.^{xxiii} The discourse of bad luck makes it harder to understand what has gone wrong; and encourages us into solutions by compensation (what Anderson describes as posting off a compensatory cheque, perhaps attached to a rather insulting message from the State Equality Board detailing the personal inadequacies that are being compensated in this way). The focus on social relations and institutions, by contrast, draws us towards ways of tackling systemic imbalances in

power. At this point, it returns us to arguments about outcome, as a crucial element in identifying and tackling imbalances in power.

My conclusion, then, is that it is more difficult to define equality as equality of outcomes when we turn to comparisons between individuals rather than groups, but that the justified inequalities that arise from the exercise of individual choice form a much smaller category of inequalities than we are accustomed –or encouraged - to assume. Where comparison between groups is concerned, equality of outcome is far more pertinent as a measure of equality than is currently allowed. It makes sense to start from the expectation that all groups would normally be distributed in roughly equal proportions along all measures of social activity: to expect, therefore, an equality of outcome, and to take any divergence from this as a reasonably safe indication that opportunities are not yet equal. Equality of outcome is often set up in stark contrast to equality of opportunity, and fares unfavourably in this comparison for most contemporary social democrats. But if we take equality of opportunity seriously^{xxiv}, this dichotomy is not helpful; on the contrary, it is more useful to regard equality of outcome as the template against which to measure equal opportunity claims. Where comparison between individuals is concerned, this would be a less plausible endeavour, for all the much rehearsed reasons relating to the diversity of aspirations and dispositions, and the importance of individual responsibility and choice. But there is a clearly a case for extending the remit of outcome arguments beyond the possibly special cases of gender, ethnicity and race, with social class as the most obvious addition, because of the way it structures these aspirations and dispositions (as well as more starkly constraining the exercise of choice). Extending the remit in this way queries the excessive focus on

individual comparisons that characterises much contemporary argument. Hopefully, it also returns us to those structures of social oppression through which most inequality occurs.

Notes

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- ⁱ Jan Narveson, 'Egalitarianism: Partial, Counterproductive, and Baseless' in A.Mason (ed) (Oxford, Blackwells, 1998)
- ⁱⁱ Ronald Dworkin 'What is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources' **Philosophy and Public Affairs** 10/4, 1981: p 332
- ⁱⁱⁱ Amartya Sen **Development As Freedom** (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1999): p69
- ^{iv} Florence Nightingale 'Cassandra', 1852, reprinted as Appendix 1 in Ray Strachey **The Cause** (London: Virago, 1978) : pp407-8
- ^v Mary Wollstonecraft **Vindication of the Rights of Woman**, first published 1792 (London: Penguin, 1975) : p170
- ^{vi} The argument therefore shares some common ground with John Roemer's analysis of **Equality of Opportunity** (Harvard University Press, 1998), which suggests that 'under an equal-opportunity policy, individuals who try equally hard should end up with equal outcomes' (p15).Roemer, however, refers only to class and racial differences when he identifies the different 'types' whose outcomes should be equalised, and it is easier in these cases to assume that people share the same broad ambitions for their lives. My own argument focuses on differences of gender and culture, where it is more widely believed that different groups want substantially different things.
- ^{vii} I refer to both ethnicity and race because ethnicity is widely understood as a cultural category, including therefore practices and traditions and beliefs. Race is more commonly employed to refer to visible differences in skin colour, and this does not necessarily map on to any significant differences in culture. So while 'race' is a particularly dubious category, simply substituting ethnicity could give the misleading impression that racial difference – and racism - is always linked to differences of culture.
- ^{viii} This last has meant a marked leap in the representation of women on city councils, from a relatively standard 24% before the 2001 elections to the near parity of 47%.
- ^{ix} Anne Phillips **The Politics of Presence** (Oxford: Clarendon Press,1995)
- ^x Brian Barry **Culture and Equality** (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000): p98
- ^{xi} Barry: p108
- ^{xii} Uma Narayan 'Undoing the "Package Picture" of Cultures' **Signs** 25/4 2000, pp1083-86; 'Essence of Culture and a Sense of History: A Feminist Critique of Cultural Essentialism' **Hypatia** 13/2 1998 pp86-106
- ^{xiii} Barry:p93
- ^{xiv} Roemer **Equality of Opportunity**: 19
- ^{xv} John Stuart Mill 'On The Subjection of Women' in Mill, **Three Essays** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975)
- ^{xvi} I take this example from Joseph Carens 'Compensatory Justice and Social Institutions' **Economics and Philosophy**, 1, 1985, pp39-67
- ^{xvii} Dworkin, 'Equality of Resources'
- ^{xviii} G.A.Cohen 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice' **Ethics** 99 (1989)
- ^{xix} Gordon Marshall, Adam Swift, and Stephen Roberts **Against the Odds? Social Class and Social Justice in Industrial Societies** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997)
- ^{xx} As Brian Barry puts it, 'destitution is too high a penalty for failure to insure'. 'Chance, Choice and Justice' in Barry **Liberty and Justice** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) p149
- ^{xxi} John Rawls **A Theory of Justice** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) p75
- ^{xxii} Elizabeth Anderson 'What Is the Point of Equality?' **Ethics** 109, 1999, p288
- ^{xxiii} See also Iris Marion Young: 'A large set of the causes of an unequal distribution of resources or unequal opportunities between individuals, however, is attributable neither to individual preferences and choices nor to luck or accident. Instead, the causes of many inequalities of resources or opportunities

among individuals lie in social institutions, their rules and relations, and the decisions others make that affect the lives of the individuals concerned.’ ‘Equality of Whom?’ **Journal of Political Philosophy**, 9/1, March 2001, p.8

^{xxiv} Equality of opportunity is problematic in many ways I have only touched on in this paper, including the rather unsavoury distinction it promotes between the ‘talented’ and ‘unlucky’, and the potentially punitive conclusions about people having to live with the consequences of their choice. One might also suggest that ‘full’ equality of opportunity involves a degree of intervention in personal and family life that would horrify most of its advocates, and casts the supposedly more authoritarian equality of outcome into the shade. There is more to be said about this, but at this point I restrict myself to the more modest conclusion.