

Can Luck Egalitarianism Cope With Oppression?

(Abstract)

Luck egalitarianism holds that disadvantages that befall to individuals through no choice or fault of their own are unjust and should be compensated. This simple view has a forceful appeal to many contemporary egalitarians, including but not limited to Richard Arneson, John Roemer, and Eric Rakowski. Other contemporary egalitarians, such as Elizabeth Anderson and Samuel Scheffler, on the other hand, criticize these theorists that embracing this view as their basic principle of justice is a misunderstanding of what equality is about. These other commentators assert that the point of egalitarianism is not warding off bad brute luck but creating equal relationships among persons. Elizabeth Anderson who most influentially voiced this criticism charges luck egalitarianism that it lacks the philosophical apparatus to oppose relational injustices, such as oppression.

Luck egalitarians, however, can reject this criticism by pointing out that egalitarianism has several points not just one, i.e. luck egalitarianism and relational egalitarianism addresses different questions, so it is not a problem that the former is silent on the problem of relational injustices, such as oppression, for it focuses on different questions of (in)justice. Nevertheless, some luck egalitarians try to answer this challenge setting up a luck egalitarian theory that can oppose oppression on pure luck egalitarian grounds.

In this paper, I will not take sides which strand of egalitarianism is more plausible as a comprehensive theory of justice, instead, I want to show that luck egalitarianism is an implausible view if we deal with cases like oppression when one group of people impose morally objectionable disadvantages on another group. I argue that egalitarian theories that try to solve the problems of oppression from luck egalitarian considerations have a problem to diagnose why oppression is wrong. In addition, I argue that luck egalitarianism's focus on personal responsibility, i.e. taking the innocence of the group upon whom the disadvantage is inflicted as the basis of compensation is an incomplete justification of such cases because rectification should stem from the wrongness of oppression, not from the innocence of the oppressed. For this reason, I hold that we cannot find a plausible luck egalitarian answer to the problem of oppression.