

Towards a Reasonable Egalitarianism

1. Introduction

... once we are troubled by the influence of either social contingencies or natural chance on the determination of distributive shares, we are bound on reflection to be bothered by the influence of the other. From a moral standpoint the two seem equally arbitrary.

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p.75

It is widely supposed that there is a symmetry in distributive justice: those who are troubled by social inequality should be troubled by natural inequality and those who are troubled by natural inequality should be troubled by social inequality; likewise, those who are unbothered by either social or natural inequality have no reason to be bothered by its counterpart. The most common reason for this assumption is apparent in the second sentence of the quotation from John Rawls given above: natural and social inequalities are, Rawls says, “equally arbitrary”. For Rawls, at least (as for many egalitarians who otherwise disagree with Rawls) the morally relevant concept motivating the claims of equality is that of arbitrariness: the idea that, in the absence of any morally relevant reason for an unequal distribution, such a distribution is unjustified and hence (a further step, of course) unjust and should, where remediable, be

changed for a more just distribution. No one should be disadvantaged by mere chance.

In this paper I shall explore and defend an egalitarian position that does not share Rawls's symmetry assumption. I shall do so on the basis, primarily, of a series of intuitions about justice and injustice in matters of distribution and by arguments regarding what I take to be the consequences of those intuitions. I should make it clear at the outset, however, that I shall not be troubled if everyone does not share all of my intuitions; on the contrary, I should be very surprised if they did.¹ I shall argue that the egalitarianism, like Rawls's, that is based on the argument from arbitrariness (egalitarianism that I shall refer to as universal egalitarianism) leads to counter-intuitive consequences. If egalitarianism is to be saved, then it seems to me that the best strategy is to argue for a morally significant distinction between natural and social inequalities.²

2 Some Governing Principles

Before addressing the issues that, as it seems to me, are most damaging to universal egalitarianism, I should like to note three principles to which I

¹ I should not be troubled, that is, if it were not the case that everybody shared my intuitions so long as some people do; I should indeed be troubled if it were the case that everybody did not share my intuitions because nobody does.

² Which is not to say, of course, that egalitarianism *can* be saved. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the moral force behind egalitarianism does not come primarily from a commitment to the principle of distributive equality but from hostility to the social consequences of distributive inequality.

adhere. I take these principles to be reasonable (if not rationally mandatory).

They will play a role in the background to the subsequent discussion.

(1) The first principle I shall call the *Principle of Relevant Difference*. It states that *if two situations are to be treated differently then there must be some morally relevant difference between them*. This is, of course, a fundamentally formal principle of ethical rationality and is adhered to by many who vehemently oppose egalitarianism as a principle of distributive justice.³

(2) The second principle I shall call the *Principle of Equal Worth*. It states that *all human beings are, as human beings, equally valuable, that is, they are equally capable of living lives that deserve to be valued*. It is important to note here the location of the adverbial modifier. The principle states that all human beings equally (that is, just in virtue of being human) are capable of living lives that are valuable; it does not state that all human beings live (or could live) lives that are of equal value. In my view, the mere fact that all human lives have value does support egalitarian conclusions, but it does not lead to them directly because of the fact that the value that they have is equal.⁴

³ See J.R. Lucas, "Against Equality"

⁴ I see three possibilities: (1) that the value that they have is (in all cases) equal; (2) that the value that they have is (in some cases, at least) unequal; (3) that the value that they have is such that it cannot be compared in a

(3) The third principle is the *Principle of Needs*. This principle states simply that *it is right to meet the needs of a morally valuable being*.⁵ The importance of this principle for the later argument is that the Principle of Needs is a distributive principle that is independent of other principles which give rise to distributive egalitarianism. This simple point is often missed: egalitarians (and anti-egalitarians) too often think that the question of distributive justice involves the search for a single principle to exhaust the field. In my view, the principle of needs supplements (but, where necessary, takes priority over) egalitarian claims. It is not itself, however, an egalitarian principle of distribution (although it does, plainly, draw on the force of the Principle of Equal Worth).

3 Two Objections to Universal Egalitarianism

I now want to examine two cases in which, it seems to me, universal egalitarianism yields counter-intuitive results.

Consider first a case of pure natural inequality. One person possesses a natural talent (let's say a highly developed intuitive sense of musical pitch and rhythm) that enables her to engage in a pleasurable and satisfying activity (let's say playing music, listening to music and dancing) to a greater degree than her

quantitative or quasi-quantitative fashion and so the alternative of (1) and (2) is not exhaustive.

⁵ I deliberately do not trouble here about whether that fact creates a positive duty in those who are in a position to meet the need. To the extent that

contemporaries. In other words, she has a substantial, untutored natural advantage. This advantage leads to purely private pleasure on her part; it generates no extraneous rewards, either in the form of money or social esteem. Now the question for the egalitarian is, should those who are relatively less well off be compensated for this? does she owe them something simply in virtue of her – unearned and undeserved – natural advantage?

I should make it clear that the situation I am envisaging is one in which the Principle of Needs does not apply. That is, everyone – my putative beneficiary and her less fortunate fellows – is too well off for it to be a matter of a claim of need on their part that there should be redistribution between them. Where at least some people are not well enough off for claims of need to have been met, then it is entirely reasonable, in my opinion, for those claims to trump the *prima facie* entitlements of the holders of natural advantages. Put simply, if you are faced with someone else’s valid claim of need, then it does not matter where your own superior welfare has come from. But in this case there are no such unmet claims.

I suggest that the answer to the question whether the musically talented woman owes something to the less well-off is “no”. I suggest, further, that this is the shared intuition of both universal and social egalitarians, but, since the implication of universal egalitarianism is precisely the opposite, universal egalitarians typically introduce further argumentation at this point in order to

someone believes that the needs of a being are morally significant then it is

close the gap between their theory and their intuition. It is claimed that the requirement of compensation for such inequalities is impermissibly intrusive. Egalitarianism, they point out (and here I am in complete agreement) does not mandate a monism of values, and, even though egalitarianism would in principle require one to even things out in such cases, this would amount to giving equality an excessive priority over the requirements of liberty or privacy. But I find this argument unpersuasive. Although it would, indeed, be intrusive to prevent my exemplary talented person from exercising her talents (but then, whom would that benefit?) it isn't particularly intrusive to require her to pay more taxes. Of course, the assessment of talents may be thought to be intrusive, but surely no more so than many assessments that are made of us as a matter of course as we pass (for instance) through educational systems and systems of health-care. But, even conceding that the assessment of talents is objectionably intrusive, I remain unconvinced that this is the reason why redistribution is unjust here. Let us suppose that we had a clear and wholly non-intrusive way of establishing the extent of a person's natural advantage, would that be enough to establish a distributive claim against my musically talented woman? I do not think so.⁶

right to meet them (even if not obligatory).

⁶ Let us suppose, however, that the situation were that, instead of one person being unusually gifted, everyone in the society had the gift with the exception of one person. Would our intuition remain? I feel a strong pull towards accepting the existence of a redistributive claim in this case but it does not seem to me to undermine the previous intuition. Where everyone has a certain ability, it does not seem plausible that enjoyment of that ability could remain a

The intuition underlying my claim that natural advantage does not require the advantaged to compensate the less advantaged is, I believe, this: it simply does not seem right that well-off people have a claim against even better-off people in a case in which the latter's superior well-being is merely a matter of natural chance. In order to develop my argument let me now consider another case in which, it seems to me, universal egalitarianism also runs counter to intuition.

Consider now not a particular individual but two societies each of which exists in complete isolation from – indeed, ignorance of – the other. Both of these societies are very well off. Let us say that all the citizens of the first society have at least the standard of living of middle-class residents of a suburban community in the Mid-West of the United States. But the second society is even better off (we might imagine them having the living standards of prosperous residents of Silicon Valley). Now imagine that these two societies came into contact. Would even an egalitarian suppose that the richer society owed something to the poorer society just because that society was less well off?⁷ I must say that this seems to me to be quite implausible.

purely private matter and so lack of the ability would further entail an inability to participate in a (rewarding) form of social interaction. In other words, where the ability is found only rarely, lack of it is of no special interest; where it is (almost) universal, lack of it is a handicap.

⁷ I am considering the claims that one society might have towards the other at that very moment when they first come into contact. If distributive claims are based on the existence of social relations (as I shall go on to suggest) then, of course, the existence of extensive contact may itself amount to the kind of distributive-claim-creating social relation that would defeat my intuition.

Here again an important ingredient in the intuitive force of the example of the isolated societies is the fact that it is played out beyond the domain of need. For needs do have a context-transcendent force. Were a rich society to discover a poor society, unable to meet its own needs, then the former would, in my view, have an obligation to the latter irrespective of the social relations (or lack of social relations) between them. But, to repeat, claims of need are not claims of equality and should not be confused with them.

An interesting criticism can be made of this example. Consider a situation in which the very rich society can, with very little cost to itself, bring about a substantial increase in welfare for its newly discovered partner. We might imagine that it knows some useful scientific or technological facts that it would hardly be costly to make known to its counterpart. Would we not think of it as having an obligation to do so, even if there are some costs to it in doing so? My answer to this is “yes” but the reason has nothing to do with universal egalitarianism – or, indeed, with egalitarianism at all. As I analyse it, the principle that gives this intuition its force is the same as that which gives unrestricted consequentialism its appeal: namely, the idea that in circumstances of moderate abundance a substantial gain in welfare is worth a modest loss of welfare, irrespective of distribution. So the obligation that is owed here is not something that the very rich society owe *qua* society that is richer than its counterpart but in virtue of being in the situation of being able to bring about a substantial increase in well-being at modest cost. One way to

test this hypothesis would be to see if it held true in the other direction. If the rich society could, at little cost to itself, very substantially benefit the very rich one would it have an obligation to do so? Again, I think that the answer is “yes”, even though the consequence would be to *increase* inequality. My only hesitation is the following. It seems as though there would be an obligation – something like a duty of gratitude – on the very rich society to compensate the rich society for the benefit received. But imagine that for some reason the very rich society could not compensate the merely rich one. In that case it seems clear enough that it would be right to expect the substantial net increase in welfare to outweigh the fact that distributive inequality is reinforced.

A question that might be asked is whether we are dealing here with a case of natural or social inequality. What is it that has led to the greater wealth of the very rich society? We might imagine two extreme cases. In one, each of the two societies started out with exactly similar natural resources but, because the citizens of one society (that is, the ancestors of the present citizens of that society) adopted a more productive form of economic organization than the other, that society is now very rich rather than merely rich. In the other case, it is a greater initial endowment of resources that is entirely responsible for the greater success of the one society over the other. Now, in my view, this further differentiation makes no difference to moral intuition. In neither case does it follow that the very rich society has a redistributive obligation towards the rich one. Certainly, the very rich society was, in some sense, luckier than the

merely rich one, whether that luck lay in its initial endowment of resources or its social organization, but the sheer fact of that luck does not lead to a redistributive claim of the sort that the universal egalitarian assumes.

Between them, these two examples point up what seems to me to be the fundamental implausibility of universal egalitarianism: the idea that anyone could owe an obligation to anyone just in virtue of the fact that that second person – she could be an alien landing from a remote galaxy – happened to be less well off. While that kind of extended domain of claimants and addressees of claims *does* seem to me entirely plausible in the case of claims of need, it does not in the case of egalitarian claims.

From which follows what I take to be the central positive point of this paper: namely, that the existence of egalitarian claims presupposes some kind of a social relationship – some form of community – between claimant and the addressee of the claim. It was the absence of such a relationship that made it seem so implausible that the merely rich society should have a claim on the even richer one, not the fact that the inequality was natural in origin. The question for the egalitarian is now, what sort of relationship is necessary to underpin egalitarian claims?

4 Social Egalitarianism

I started this paper with a quotation from Rawls in which he commits himself to universal egalitarianism on the grounds that allowing either natural chance

or social contingency to determine distributive shares is morally arbitrary. This is certainly one strand in Rawls's egalitarianism.⁸ But it is not the only one. There is also a strand of what I shall call *social egalitarianism*.

Society, says Rawls in a famous phrase, "is a co-operative venture for mutual advantage".⁹ Principles of justice, he goes on, "define the appropriate distribution of the benefits and burdens of social co-operation". Reading this in what seems to me the most natural way, a distinction between universal and social egalitarianism becomes apparent: while the universal egalitarian is concerned to remedy all forms of arbitrary inequality, the social egalitarian is concerned only (only!) to ensure that the benefits and burdens of social co-operation are distributed equally. Social egalitarianism, then, embodies a concern for inequalities that are social in origin. But that is not all: the inequalities it is concerned with are inequalities that arise in the context of a social relationship between the affected parties.

If we adopt social egalitarianism, the first intuitive objection to egalitarianism that troubled us in Section 3 is removed at a stroke: the musically gifted person is under no obligation to compensate others for her

⁸ Some people may find it odd that I speak without qualification of Rawls's "egalitarianism". Does not Rawls, after all, justify inequalities in his defence of the Difference Principle? Indeed he does. But it should be recognized that such deviations from equality are sanctioned *only* when it is not possible to achieve the same level of welfare-relevant resources (primary goods, in Rawls's terminology) for the least advantaged by an equal distribution. In cases where aggregate resource levels are inelastic with respect to distribution (that is where, like a cake, they remain the same size however they are cut up) the Rawlsian position is that of equality.

natural good fortune since the benefit that she receives from this gift is not a benefit of social co-operation. Nor does the very rich society have a redistributive obligation towards the merely rich one. But, unsurprisingly, social egalitarianism brings with it its own problems. In particular, the social egalitarian must deal with two issues that do not arise for the universal egalitarian.

The first concerns the *domain* of the social. Rawls suggests that the subject-matter of justice is the benefits and burdens of social co-operation, but who are the “co-operators”? To whom do we owe a share of such benefits? For the classic contractarians, Hobbes and Locke, the answer is clear: we co-operate with those with whom we have made a common commitment. For Rawls, however, this answer is unavailable. As he makes plain, his version of the social contract (like Kant’s) is purely hypothetical.¹⁰ So who is obliged to whom? Everyone who *might* sign such a contract? That would mean that the domain of co-operation would include all rational moral agents and in that case the egalitarian would come up against my second example in the previous section. Since the members of each of those two societies are certainly moral

⁹ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Oxford: O.U.P., 1972), p.4

¹⁰ Unfortunately – and it seems to me to be a very great weakness of his theory – Rawls does not, to my knowledge, explicitly address this problem. He generally writes as if the units of social co-operation were simply traditional nation-states (or as if the whole of human society were one nation-state) thus begging (as it seems to me) some of the most difficult and troubling questions for any theory of justice. This assumption seems to be reinforced in his later consideration of international justice which deals with the relationship

agents it follows that the very rich society would indeed have a redistributive duty towards the merely rich society, contrary to my (and, I hope, the reader's) intuitive conviction. The point is that those two societies were not, as a matter of fact, co-operating with one another and it seems reasonable to conclude that the reason why we do not believe that the one has a redistributive obligation to the other is just that. The fact that they might, hypothetically, have entered into a scheme of co-operation with one another should not override the fact that in actuality they have not.

The second great question that the social egalitarian must answer concerns the relationship between natural and social inequalities. Consider a phrase I used above: I said that the social egalitarian is concerned with inequalities that are "social in origin". But this phrase is potentially highly confusing. In what sense are inequalities "social in origin"? Most inequalities that we know about are the result of both social and natural factors. Thus (to advert to a very famous example) very tall but athletic men can turn this natural characteristic to great economic advantage in American society in virtue of the fact that America values basket-ball players highly and recruits them on a competitive open market. The social egalitarian must determine what the moral consequences are of these different components of inequality: does one override the other or do they each carry weight?

between nation-states as if the latter were the basic entities within which distributive justice is to be established.

My proposal is for a form of social egalitarianism that builds upon Rawls's idea of society as a co-operative enterprise. However, it seems to me that the appropriate interpretation of this notion sets the boundaries of what counts as a common enterprise far wider than Rawls himself does. In my opinion, co-operation in the modern world takes place through the great chain of the world economy and all those who participate by monetary exchange within that economic system should be counted as fellow-co-operators with the concomitant mutual obligations. Furthermore, those who contribute value to the enterprise in a way that is not monetarily recognised (most obviously, of course, by taking on socially necessary tasks within the family) should also be counted as part of the co-operative enterprise. Thus my form of social egalitarianism, though it does not recognise egalitarian obligations among people whose lives are wholly disjoint from one another, *does* in practice extend the domain of the social towards mankind as a whole: in our world, there are no societies that are entirely separate from one another.

The implications of this will only lead to egalitarianism, however, if the social element in the genesis of inequality is held to override the natural element. The natural inequality by which some men are tall and athletic feeds into a social process the outcome of which is that they, as basket-ball players, are wealthy. Certain liberals argue that, provided that that social process is a properly neutral "pure procedure", such unequal outcomes are protected from redistributive claims. I do not share this intuition. Although a pure procedure

may be neutral in the sense of not discriminating irrelevantly between differently endowed participants, it is not neutral in the stronger sense of making no difference to the final outcome. On the contrary, different impersonal procedures applied under different social circumstances would yield different degrees of inequality. Natural inequalities are thus, we might say, “socially mediated” and, for that reason, I maintain, the outcome is properly subject to redistribution.

5 Objections

Having thus laid out my version of the social egalitarian position, it is time to consider some main objections to it. It seems to me that the most troubling flow from the tie that I make between entitlement and participation in the system of social co-operation. What is the entitlement of non-participants in the system of co-operation? What is to count as such co-operation? And is it plausible that the consequence of participation in the system of social co-operation should be an equal entitlement?

Let me start by reiterating a point made earlier in the paper: it is not my view that the only kind of justified claims with redistributive consequences are egalitarian ones. On the contrary, claims of need are separate from egalitarian claims. They hold between all equally valuable moral agents, irrespective of the social relations between them and they should take priority over egalitarian claims. Thus we may think of egalitarianism as distributively relevant only

where claims of need have already been met. Those who only have the entitlement to have their needs met will therefore, other things being equal, be worse off than those who also have egalitarian entitlements. But it should be remembered that some people have very expensive needs. So it certainly doesn't follow that fewer resources will be given to those whose only entitlement is to have needs met.

Who might these non-participants be? In the first case, of course, they may be those who lead lives that are entirely disjoint from our own: they would have entitlements based on need but no more. But there are, in my view, no such people remaining on our planet. A more plausible case might be those who wish to withdraw for whatever reason from the system of social co-operation. It would plainly be wrong to coerce people into remaining within such a system, whatever its economic benefits, but in opting out they should lose their egalitarian entitlements.¹¹ But most difficult is the case of those who are unable, not unwilling, to participate. It should be noted that such people will, typically, be people with needs that are greater than those of ordinary, able-bodied citizens. Yet even so an egalitarian may think it wrong that they should not be thought of as having a right to benefit from co-operation to the extent that their able-bodied brothers and sisters do.

¹¹ But what should they retain? A tough view would say that they retain nothing more than the right to have claims of need met. Another would be that they have the right to a certain "patrimony" – to their share of the common stock of resources that are available to those engaged in the cooperative enterprise. My inclination is to think the former.

In response, let me first say a little more about the concept of needs. “Needs” as I understand them are the conditions necessary for someone to have the possibility of a good life. Now what those conditions are may vary greatly between moral agents. The severely mentally handicapped may, for instance, simply not have the possibility of the kind of good life that is open to the able. Thus to meet those persons’ needs but meet their needs only does not necessarily mean that they are deprived in relation to the possible forms of self-fulfilment open to them.

A further response might involve extending the notion of social co-operation. As I have presented it, its core idea founds egalitarian entitlement on participation in a system of economic co-operation, irrespective of the sentiments which one bears towards fellow-participants. Yet in one passage of *A Theory of Justice* Rawls offers a different account of the ethical foundations of egalitarianism: the difference principle corresponds, he says, “to a natural meaning of fraternity, namely to the idea of not wanting to have greater advantages unless this is to the benefit of others who are less well off”.¹²

Now someone who holds this sentiment in unrestricted form will be unimpressed by the cases I discussed in Section 3 above: if she were naturally musically talented she would not want to enjoy that talent if it did not benefit others and if she were a member of the very rich society I hypothesised she would still consider herself under a redistributive obligation towards the

¹² Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 105

merely rich society. It seems to me plausible that we should expect to extend the sentiment of fraternity to some cases outside the boundaries of the system of co-operation, even though not to all conceivable ones. Thus, while we would not recognize an egalitarian obligation towards those who are rich and independent from us, perhaps we should recognize such an obligation towards those who are indeed dependent upon us.

Finally, I come to what for many will seem to be the most fundamental objection to my position. Why, one might ask, do I believe that mere participation in the co-operative enterprise entitles everyone to an equal share of the benefits? Surely it would not be rational for well-endowed individuals to contract into such a scheme. Where is the advantage in it for them? Do not those who contribute more, deserve more? My response to this is that the intuitions on which such counter-positions to my own rest are neither self-evident nor unchallengeable and I do not share them. Entitlement theories suggest that the reason that those who are naturally well-endowed and hence contribute more to the productive process deserve to be better rewarded is two-fold. First, such people are entitled to their natural endowments (this part, of course, I agree with) and, beyond that, they have a right to engage in social co-operation on any terms that they can freely negotiate with others (which is what I deny). Likewise, I do not share the intuition that those who have contributed more (always assuming that we can identify the extent of that contribution in such a way that it makes sense to speak of “more” and “less”)

deserve more. In general, the position that I am advancing here does not accept the image of justice as a matter of prudential compromise between self-seeking individuals.

Those who have different intuitions regarding the foundations of distributive justice will, no doubt, disagree with me on these matters. But my object in this paper has not been to provide grounds for rejecting non-egalitarian views. What I have tried to argue is that egalitarianism can be radical without being indefensible.

Michael Rosen
Lincoln College
Oxford OX1 3DR