Luck egalitarianism

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Abstract

Luck egalitarianism is a view of distributive justice. Its central claim is that it is unjust when people are worse off through no choice or fault of their own. Ronald Dworkin offered the first account of luck egalitarianism in two articles in 1981. A significant number of other philosophers have developed, diversified, and refined the view since. This entry consists of three parts. First, it describes the origins of luck egalitarianism. Second, it introduces two of its central characteristics: the distinction between brute luck and option luck and the need for a principle of stakes. Third, it explores two important objections to luck egalitarianism, regarding the treatment of those with bad option luck and those with bad brute luck.

Keywords

G.A. Cohen; difference principle; Ronald Dworkin; egalitarianism; equality of opportunity; justice; luck egalitarianism; Derek Parfit; John Rawls; respect

Introduction

Luck egalitarianism is a view of distributive justice. Its central claim is that it is unjust when people are worse off through no choice or fault of their own. This entry describes the origins of luck egalitarianism, introduces two of its central characteristics, and explores two important objections.

Origins

The term ‘luck egalitarianism’ was coined by Elizabeth Anderson (1999, 289) in a critique. The target of her critique was a set of egalitarian views proposed during the 1980s and 1990s (Arneson 1989; Cohen 1989; Dworkin 1981a; 1981b; Nagel 1991, chp. 8; Rakowski 1991; see EGALITARIANISM; EQUALITY; EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY). What unites these views is the claim that it is unjust when people are worse off “through no choice or fault of theirs” (Parfit 1995, 33; see PARFIT, DEREK). Ronald Dworkin offered the first account of luck egalitarianism (1981a; 1981b; see DWORKIN, RONALD). A significant number of other philosophers have developed, diversified, and refined the view since (*cf.* Lippert-Rasmussen 2015). Although Dworkin is often claimed to be the founder of luck egalitarianism, he actually disavowed the label ‘luck egalitarian’ (2003, 190; see Arneson 2018 for discussion).

Luck egalitarianism was first proposed at a time when John Rawls’s (1971; see RAWLS, JOHN) liberal-egalitarian view of distributive justice was very influential. A common objection to his theory is that it requires transfers to the undeserving—to those who are needy because of their (preventable) indolence or laziness (Arneson 1997; Cohen 1989; Matravers 2007; Scheffler 1992; 2003; see DIFFERENCE PRINCIPLE). Luck egalitarianism accommodates this concern about transfers to

the undeserving, because it only requires transfers when the badly off are not responsible for their plight. G.A. Cohen remarked on this that “Dworkin has, in effect, performed for egalitarianism the considerable service of incorporating within it the most powerful idea in the arsenal of the anti-egalitarian right: the idea of choice and responsibility” (1989, 933; see COHEN, G.A.).

Luck egalitarianism remains, to this day, an important strand of egalitarianism (Barry 2006; Elford 2017; Knight 2009; Lippert-Rasmussen 2015; Segall 2007). In recent years, however, it has lost some popularity to relational egalitarianism (Anderson 1999; Arneson 2010; Fourie 2015; Schemmel 2021). There is debate about the extent to which relational egalitarianism can be subsumed under the header of luck egalitarianism (Lippert-Rasmussen 2018).

Occasionally, luck egalitarianism is referred to as “equality of fortune” (Anderson 1999, 289) or “responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism” (Knight 2009, 1). Especially the ‘responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism’ label is gaining popularity in recent years. It is important to note, however, that not all responsibility-sensitive egalitarian views are luck egalitarian (*cf.* Stemplowska 2009).

Central characteristics

There are two central characteristics that all luck egalitarian views share: the distinction between brute luck and option luck and the need for a principle of stakes.

Brute luck and option luck

Luck is pervasive in life, and not all luck is the same. To determine when people are worse off through no fault or choice of their own, luck egalitarians distinguish between brute luck and option luck. This distinction was originally introduced by Dworkin, who explains it as follows: “[o]ption luck is a matter of how deliberate and calculated gambles turn out—whether someone gains or loses through accepting an isolated risk he or she should have anticipated and might have declined. Brute luck is a matter of how risks fall out that are not in that sense deliberate gambles” (Dworkin 1981a, 293). An example of option luck is the change in value of a stock one buys on a stock exchange; an example of brute luck is being “hit by a falling meteorite whose course could not have been predicted” (293).

Commonly, luck egalitarians believe that the distributive effects of brute luck should be neutralized by governments (or other agents of justice), whereas the distributive effects of option luck should not be neutralized. On this view, those who lose money on the stock exchange should not be compensated, whereas those whose house is destructed by a falling meteorite should be.

After Dworkin’s original formulation, several luck egalitarians have offered accounts that can help distinguish between brute and option luck. There are two major views in the literature: choice-based views and control-based views (Lippert-Rasmussen 2016, 59-60). On choice-based views, X is option luck for someone when they substantially and voluntarily chose it – and brute luck when they did not (Cohen 2011, 13; Scheffler 2003, 5; Stemplowska 2013). On control-based views, on the other hand, X is option luck for someone when they do or did control it – and brute luck when they do or did not (Otsuka 2002, 40; Zimmerman 1993, 219).

The two views frequently come to similar verdicts, but they do come apart in a few important cases (Lippert-Rasmussen 2015, ch. 3). An example is overdetermination: suppose that motorcyclist Bert voluntarily drives recklessly and gets into an accident. The accident, however, was overdetermined. It would have happened even if Bert had not driven recklessly. On the choice view, he should bear the relative burdens produced by his recklessness (such as his injuries) because he chose to drive recklessly. On the control view, however, he should not, because he had no control over the occurrence of the accident: it would have happened anyway (Brouwer & Mulligan 2019, 2274).

Although many luck egalitarians believe that only brute luck should be neutralized, Knight (2021) has recently defended "all luck egalitarianism" (a label introduced by Segall 2010, 46): the view that option luck should be neutralized as well.

Principles of stakes

The second element that all views of luck egalitarianism share, is their need for a principle of stakes. Such a principle offers an account of the nature of option luck consequences that can justifiably be allotted to those who engaged in the relevant voluntary choice, or act over which an agent had control (Arneson 2001; Olsaretti 2009; Vallentyne 2002; Scheffler 2005; Stemplowska 2009, 2013).

To see the need for a principle of stakes, it is helpful to consider the case of praiseworthy, costly choices (Eyal 2007; Temkin 2011). Suppose that Agnes rescues her neighbour from their burning house and gets hurt during the attempt; she requires medical care, and her wellbeing has decreased significantly. On many accounts of luck egalitarianism, this rescue attempt

counts as a case of option luck, and hence Agnes would not be entitled to luck neutralization (Moriarty 2018, 166). But which consequences should she bear exactly? Should she pay for the full price of her medical treatment, for instance? And should she compensate her employer if she cannot work during the recovery period? A principle of stakes helps identify what consequences Agnes should bear.

One possible principle of stakes is contextualism. According to contextualism, agents should bear all the consequences of their option luck, as they happen to turn out in the world around them (Rakowski 1991 defends a position along these lines, see Olsaretti 2009, 180). Contextualism could, thus, somewhat colloquially, be described as the 'let the chips fall where they may' view: if Agnes decided not to buy health insurance, for instance, then she should pay for her medical care herself, even if her medical bills are very high.

There are, however, alternative accounts of stakes available to the luck egalitarian. Endorsing a principle of stakes other than contextualism implies a resort to pluralism, combining the distinction between brute luck and option luck with another value. One possibility is a desert-based principle, according to which people should only bear those consequences of their voluntary choices that they deserve (Brouwer & Mulligan 2019, sec. 3.1.; Dekker 2009; Moriarty 2018, 166). On this view, Agnes is likely to deserve reimbursement of her medical costs, because she successfully rescued her neighbour, a praiseworthy act. Another possibility is a consequentialist principle, on which people should bear those consequences of their choices that would be optimal for them to bear from a societal point of view (Vallentyne 2002). Here, again, Agnes would probably be in line for reimbursement of her medical

costs, because saving a life – even if one gets harmed in the process – is likely to be optimal from the societal point of view.

The literature on the principles of stakes emerged during the early 2000s, largely in response to critiques of luck egalitarianism.

Objections

The most prominent objections to luck egalitarianism regard how the view treats those with bad option luck and those with bad brute luck.

Bad option luck

The objection that luck egalitarianism is too harsh on the victims of bad option luck is usually called the 'harshness objection' (Voigt 2007). Anderson (1999) and Fleurbaey (1995) both raise it using an example of a motorway accident. As Anderson puts it: "Consider an uninsured driver who negligently makes an illegal turn that causes an accident with another car. Witnesses call the police, reporting who is at fault; the police transmit this information to emergency technicians. When they arrive at the scene and find that the driver at fault is uninsured, they leave him to die by the side of the road" (1999, 295). She goes on to note that for Rakowski (1991), a defender of a contextualist principle of stakes, "this action is just" (295), because "the faulty driver has no claim of justice to continued medical care" (296).

There have been three types of responses to the harshness objection (Albertsen & Nielsen 2020, 429-430). The first is to bite the bullet and reject the notion that it is unfair to abandon the victims of bad option luck (cf. Stemplowska 2017). The second is to resort to pluralism, endorsing, for instance, a

principle of stakes other than contextualism (Olsaretti 2009). The third is to revise luck egalitarianism itself, for example by arguing that it requires public insurance (Knight 2015).

Bad brute luck

A second prominent objection to luck egalitarianism holds that it is disrespectful to the victims of bad brute luck (McTernan 2013; Wolff 1997). Some critics have argued, for instance, that under a luck egalitarian welfare scheme, welfare recipients would have to make shameful revelations. They have "to behave in a way, or reveal things about themselves, which can rationally be expected to reduce their respect-standing" (Wolff 1997, 109). A luck egalitarian state would force people "not merely to admit but to make out a convincing case that one is a failure, unable to gain employment even when there is no difficulty for others (1997, 114).

Here, again, luck egalitarians can resort to three main responses: (1) biting the bullet, (2) resorting to pluralism (Barry 2006; Wolff 1997), and (3) revising luck egalitarianism itself (Arneson 2000; Tan 2008).

Several other objections have been raised against luck egalitarianism (for discussion, see Lippert-Rasmussen 2015; 2018; Axelsen, Bidadanure & Meijers 2021).

See also

difference principle, Cohen, G.A., Dworkin, Ronald, egalitarianism, equality, equality of opportunity, justice, Parfit, Derek, Rawls, John.

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