Equality of Opportunity

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"It is possible," Tawney wrote forty years ago, "that intelligent tadpoles reconcile themselves to the inconveniences of their position, by reflecting that, though most of them will live and die as tadpoles and nothing more, the more fortunate of the species will one day shed their tails, distend their mouths and stomachs, hop nimbly on to dry land, and croak addresses to their former friends on the virtues by means of which tadpoles of character and capacity can rise to be frogs."[1] Tawney was speaking of the notion of equality of opportunity, which has played such a central role in the defense of old-style free-enterprise capitalism. Argue with a defender of this economic system and he would have told you in the past, as he will tell you now, that the inequalities of capitalism represent the working out of equality of opportunity.

But socialists and apostles of the welfare state are also adherents of equality of opportunity. Tawney wrote the words I have quoted above forty years ago, before the immense variety of programs aiming at greater equality had been introduced in Western nations; before World War II had exercised its great equalizing influence on the conditions and style of life in his own country, Great Britain; and before the effort had been made to provide broad access to a great range of social goods, such as adequate health care and higher education, that had been hitherto monopolized by small, privileged minorities. Yet through the course of this whole period, the guiding ideal, the justifying slogan, has been equality of opportunity, and the persisting complaint has been, as in previous periods, that equality of opportunity still does not exist. Similarly, a socialist may tell you that equality of opportunity has been part of the ideology by which capitalism has masked its true nature, but he nevertheless usually argues for socialism on the grounds that it alone provides true equality of opportunity. Marx's motto, at least for the transitional period of socialism

1. R. H. Tawney, *Equality* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1929), p. 127.

that precedes the full achievement of communism, is: "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his abilities."

Indeed, the respect that has been paid to the principle of equality of opportunity goes beyond our own age, and even beyond the circle of believers in human equality. Unflinching antiegalitarians have apparently not been able to dispense with it. Plato defended the rigid hierarchical structure of his ideal state in part by arguing that it would be so organized that the best people in it would be selected for the most powerful positions; and Burke defended the inherited class system of Great Britain on the ground, among others, that it was an open system in which people capable of doing so rose steadily into the upper classes. In sum, democrats and antidemocrats, socialists and adherents of free enterprise, have all apparently been able to say that they believe in at least this much—that individuals ought to have a chance to go as far as their talents permit, and that it is the mark of a good society that its best people rise to the top. "Most social systems," as Tawney said, "need a lightning-conductor. The formula which supplies it to our own is equality of opportunity. The conception is one to which homage is paid today by all, including those who resist most strenuously attempts to apply it."[2] All that separates the various proponents of this ideal, at any rate on the surface, is a difference of opinion over the kind of society which is best designed to achieve it. But all say that they wish to achieve it. Equality of opportunity is everybody's girl.

We probably ought not to be too surprised, therefore, that the notion of equality of opportunity has not been the subject of very much close inspection. The universal popularity of an idea usually discourages its close inspection; and if it were so inspected, it would probably not remain universally popular. Yet the key role which the notion of equality of opportunity plays in contemporary politics, law, education, and social discussion in general invites us to look at it carefully. Indeed, its universal popularity should arouse some suspicion. Social ideas, if their meaning is at all clear, stand for some specific way of exercising power or distributing the goods of the world. They help some people more than they help others, and they represent positive threats to some people's position and possessions. If equality of opportunity is a significant ideal, there ought to be some people who are opposed to it. Or it may well be that it is a highly stretchable or ambiguous concept, which cloaks strongly divergent ideas over which people do in fact disagree. A verbal formula which everybody employs, and which therefore creates the impression of general agreement on fundamentals, is often very useful politically. But it may also prevent the clear analysis of issues and the formulation of the choices that have to be made. The peace it brings is therefore an unstable peace and one that comes at too high a price. In any case, the notion of equality

2. Ibid., p. 124.

of opportunity plays so central a role in the pantheon of contemporary social ideals that it clearly merits philosophical examination.

What, then, do we have in mind when we speak of "equality of opportunity"? What sort of arguments can we give to defend this ideal? Why, in fact, should we wish to defend it? And why has the ideal played so central a role in social philosophy? These questions, I believe, take us to the heart of some of the most controverted issues on the contemporary scene.

I

To pursue these questions, it is necessary first to step back from them and to review some of the problems inherent in the general ideal of equality. For the notion of equality of opportunity, although it is not itself analyzed, is commonly invoked in order to resolve these problems. Let us begin by examining three versions of the notion of equality—what I shall call "formal equality," "fundamental" or "basic equality," and "distributive equality."

1. *Formal equality*.—According to Aristotle, "Injustice arises when equals are treated unequally and also when unequals are treated equally."[3] This formula obviously requires that we possess rules which allow us to determine who is equal to whom and what is equal to what. Provided we have such rules, however, any set of rules will do. Thus, equality can be given a purely formal meaning. It simply calls for treating like cases alike, where "like cases" are defined by a given system of rules. It demands that we make no further distinctions between individuals but those expressly required by the rules.

This is not unimportant, unless one thinks that a barrier against arbitrary decisions and special favoritism is unimportant. However, the reasons why many find a purely formal conception of equality inadequate are evident. It is compatible with the existence of bad rules and with highly stratified societies. If, for example, a society has rules which distinguish between its members in terms of their ancestry, the principle of formal equality remains uninfringed so long as all the members of this society are treated uniformly in accordance with these distinctions, and only in accordance with them. Indeed, if it is a fundamental rule of a society that individuals shall be assigned social positions, or given rewards and punishments, in accordance with the sovereign's caprice, then formal equality would be compatible even with capriciousness. Herodotus noticed that, in this respect, all who lived under Oriental despots were equal. Accordingly, opinions to the contrary notwithstanding,[4] formal equality,

3. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 5.

4. Isaiah Berlin, for example, writes: "In so far as some minimum degree of prevalence of rules is a necessary condition for the existence of human societies . . . , and in so far as morality, both personal and political, is largely conceived of in terms of rules, the kind of equality with which obedience to rules is virtually identical, is among the deepest needs and convictions of mankind. . . . A plea for equality in this

if we interpret it absolutely strictly, cannot even be defended in terms of the general importance of rules and stability in human society.

Few believers in equality, therefore, have been satisfied with a purely formal interpretation of it. They have wanted society organized not simply in accordance with rules, but with rules of a certain character. In fact, even their conception of formal equality has not been an absolutely formal one: it has been a partly substantive conception, involving the specific notion of rules that are consistent with what is known, in broad terms, as the rule of law. And beyond this, they have wished to have rules which make distinctions that are reasonable and morally defensible and that do not obscure the ways in which individuals are alike and should be treated alike.

2. *"Fundamental" or "basic" equality.*—This brings us to a second version or aspect of the notion of equality. What do we mean by "reasonable" and "morally defensible"? And what are the ways in which people are alike, and in which it is wrong to make distinctions between them? It is at this point that a variety of well-known assertions are made—that all men are created equal; that all have minds and consciences (or at least the potentiality of having them), and thus have certain inalienable rights; that each human being is of equal worth, in some ultimate sense, with every other because all partake in common of the quality of humanity. To analyze what is meant by such assertions, or to evaluate the arguments that have been given for them, would take me far afield. It is enough to focus here on their intent and practical consequence. They propose a policy or procedure which it is recommended we follow whenever we introduce, or attempt to justify, any distinctions between individuals.

This policy or procedure is to treat all members of a society—or of the human race—as members of a single reference group. Accordingly, when distinctions are made between individuals a reason has to be given for these distinctions. And since the reason will involve invoking a rule of some kind, a reason has to be given for this rule. In short, the belief in the fundamental or basic equality of men shifts the *onus probandi*. Those who would treat people differently have to explain why. Those who would treat people the same are not normally subject to this requirement.

The historical consequences of this doctrine have of course been

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sense is therefore a plea for life in accordance with rules as opposed to other standards, e.g., the *ad hoc* orders of an inspired leader, or arbitrary desires" ("Equality as an Ideal," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 [1955–56], reprinted in Frederick A. Olafson, ed., *Justice and Social Policy* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961], p. 132). But the last sentence quoted appears to rest on a distinction that is not a distinction, unless we can say what the difference is between *rules* and *standards*. If we wish to say that inspired leaders may not issue ad hoc orders, this is to establish a set of rules superior to the sovereign's will. But if no such rules are established, and if it is generally understood and accepted that what the ruler says is equal *is* equal, then people are living in accordance with a rule—a most troubling and frightening one, admittedly, but a rule nonetheless. Nor is this a purely hypothetical possibility: consider Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia at certain long moments in their history.

enormous. Since all established social systems in fact treat people differently, the doctrine of fundamental equality brought them all into court for trial. And in this trial, it gave the prosecution an advantage it had not hitherto possessed. A social system had to prove its innocence; the accuser did not have to prove its guilt. Thus, the process by which societies argue that their structures are legitimate also changed. What came to justify a social structure was not historical precedent but the benefits it offered individuals, not its heroic achievements in the past but its promise of future achievement. Most important of all, perhaps, the doctrine of fundamental equality made individuals the fundamental units in measuring social value. For it gave a secondary and subordinate status to all specific social groups or social hierarchies; the primary group was all individuals taken indiscriminately. Any distinctions we make between individuals, therefore, must be purely functional distinctions; they are justified only when they serve a specific purpose, and they are warranted only when they are restricted to the area in which they serve that purpose. We can distinguish between a general and a private within the army because such distinctions are necessary to an army; but when it comes to paying taxes, or the right to vote, we shall pay no attention to distinctions of military rank. Indeed, the validity of any purpose to which we appeal in order to justify treating people differently must itself be judged solely in terms of its relation to the well-being or fulfillment of individuals. We have grown so accustomed to this approach to human affairs that we do not realize how unusual it is in the record of human history.

Nevertheless, serious problems remain with this approach, even if we neglect the problem of proving its validity. As is the case with the concept of formal equality, the notion that men are fundamentally or basically (or naturally or metaphysically) equal is compatible with extreme inequalities in practical fact. All that the belief in fundamental equality requires us to do is to give good reasons for treating people unequally. But it does not say that there never are such reasons; nor does it tell us what is or is not a good reason, beyond the restriction that all reasons must refer in the end to the well-being of individuals rather than to that of groups.

Thus, it has been found to be perfectly compatible with the fundamental equality of men that business entrepreneurs should be rewarded more handsomely than dutiful ditchdiggers. The ground for this practice is the factual assertion that the entrepreneur makes a more important contribution to the general prosperity, and that the rewards offered him are necessary in order to encourage him to take the risks that go with the performance of his social function. This proposition may or may not be true, but it is certainly not self-evidently false. Similarly, laws protecting the rights of inheritance, special scholarships for the intelligent, and dachas for ballerinas have all been accepted in modern societies by people who sincerely think themselves firm believers in the basic equality of men. The

fundamental rights of man seem to guarantee, in the words of the cynic, that the rich and the poor have an equal right to sleep under bridges. They may give certain basic rights to all, but they still leave men unequal in most respects; and just as much to the point, the equality they give is an equality which is not equally important to all who have it.

Thus, the ideal of equality has had to be fleshed out, to be given a more substantial embodiment than the abstract doctrine of the basic equality of all men. The fundamental rights of man as they emerged out of eighteenth-century revolutions were addressed to the removal of the special forms of legal classification and discrimination descended from the Old Regime. It is too easily forgotten by those with an Anglo-Saxon background, and particularly by Americans, that the term "bourgeois," for example, stood not simply for a sociological category but for a quite precise, legally defined group. The assertion of universal natural rights was intended to undercut such legal distinctions. However, these universal rights left largely untouched and unregulated other kinds of difference in class, power, and economic preferment which also render men unequal. "Grâce au capitalisme," as Henri Sée observed, "les distinctions économiques se substituent aux distinctions juridiques."[5]

3. *Distributive equality*.—There has emerged, therefore, a stronger conception of equality which argues that, in a just society, there should be, in practical terms, a more equal distribution of substantive benefits and burdens. Greater uniformity should exist not only in legal guarantees but in the actual possession of material things, in the access to immaterial goods like education which exercise a central influence on a man's destiny, and in the kind of respect and deference that build his self-image and nourish his capacities. At the very least, even if absolute uniformity cannot or should not be achieved, sharp or extreme differences in these respects should not exist between one man's situation and another's.

Needless to say, this conception of equality is a response to injustices whose reality and importance no dialectic can deny. But we must still ask some questions about it. Difficulties begin the moment one asks just what this equality is or why anyone should want it. Let us consider four.

a) The first is one which distributive equality shares with the concept of fundamental equality—namely, why should we think that making distinctions between people requires more explanation than failing to make distinctions between them? Partisans of equality commonly take the view that the rule that men should be treated alike unless there are good reasons not to do so is prima facie more plausible than other rules. But this is anything but plain. In explanation of this assumption, for example, Isaiah Berlin has written:

> The assumption is that equality needs no reasons, only inequality does so. . . . If I have a cake and there are ten persons among whom I wish to divide it, then

5. Henry Sée, *Les origines du capitalisme moderne* (Paris: A. Colin, 1926), p. 183.

if I give exactly one tenth to each, this will not, at any rate automatically, call for justification; whereas if I depart from this principle of equal division I am expected to produce a special reason. It is some sense of this, however latent, that makes equality an ideal which has never seemed intrinsically eccentric, even though extreme forms of it may not have been wholly acceptable to either political thinkers or ordinary men throughout recorded history.[6]

But is it true that, with respect to the example given, one would have to produce a reason only if one did not give each person an equal sized piece of cake? If we were awarding pieces of cake in relation to people's scores in a game of golf, we would have to give a reason for dividing the cake equally. Nor can we call the fact that a contest has been held a "special" reason, of the kind that we have to invoke in order to justify departing from a principle by which we would otherwise automatically abide. There is nothing automatic about it. No one would be surprised if we gave pieces of cake to children of twelve that were twice as large as those we gave to children of two or dieters of forty. No one would think a reason was needed, if we lived in the kind of society in which such behavior was expected, if we gave the largest piece of cake to the oldest male and no cake at all to the females. Indeed, if we did not do this, we would be asked to give a reason.

In sum, the idea that absolute equality is somehow a natural, or intellectually prior, or intrinsically uneccentric, principle, and that it is only when we deviate from this principle that we have to give justifying reasons, is unwarranted. It rests on the assumption that there is some single standard set of conditions in which distributions are made. But if there are no conditions that can be regarded as *the* standard conditions, this view turns out to rest on an unargued prepossession. The concrete conditions in which distributions are made are part of what we have to know in order to know what we are going to mean by equality. And since there is no single standard set of conditions, there is no single standard meaning of equality.

b) A second difficulty is closely connected to this first one. Suppose that we give each person an equal portion of cake, but that one man complains because he just does not happen to like cake. Has he been treated equally with the others? To generalize this example, why should individuals who are different from one another be placed in similar circumstances and treated in the same way? Does this not mean that Peter, for whom these circumstances are fitting, will benefit more than Paul, to whose nature and needs they may be foreign? And is this not simply another form of inequality, since it consists in treating unequals equally? The believer in distributive equality must explain in just what way he is not denying one of the fundamental values to which the ideal of equality is attached—the value of individuality. For he seems to be employing a rule which leads

6. Berlin, p. 131.

to arbitrary judgments with regard to individuals—or rather to the refusal to judge individuals at all.

There is, of course, a kind of answer to this objection. It can be said that if cake is distributed and one of the recipients does not like cake, provision can be made for him to exchange it for something else of equal value. But this raises the question of what standard of value to employ. We shall now have a society in which in fact different people have available to them quite different things, although all these different things—four ounces of cake or ten minutes of Mozart, time and a half for overtime or an extra month's vacation, the pleasures of a Dry Martini or the pleasures of friendship—are somehow interchangeable on a universally satisfactory scale of measurement. That this is a state of affairs not likely to be achieved, or even approximated, in practice, I do not think requires long argument.

c) Even when we simplify and restrict the notion of distributive equality, we do not avoid difficulties. It can be said—indeed, it probably should be said—that the considerations I have just mentioned are all much too abstract, that the ordinary advocate of equality knows just what he means, and that he means something much more definite. He has in mind a plain and imperious demand—namely, that some elementary human needs, such as food, shelter, and health, must be satisfied as a condition for a minimally decent human life. And the equality he seeks is simply equality with respect to the satisfaction of these needs. But at least two questions are raised by such a response.

The first is: What needs shall we include in the category of basic needs? The need for higher education? This is increasingly accepted as a basic need today, but such was not always the case. The need to visit suffering on those one hates? This is a widespread and powerful need, to the satisfaction of which, on the record, human beings have been prepared to sacrifice health, leisure, civil harmony, and even personal safety. Why, then, is it not a basic need? Yet I know of no partisan of equality who favors providing for it. He carries into the argument, even when he wishes to take care only of "basic needs," an independent view of what these needs are. I do not quarrel with him about this. In fact, I share his position. But the question that regularly causes controversy and that the call for equality does not in itself settle, is: How do we establish the list of "basic needs"? That it is an indefinitely expandable list is at least suggested by recent history.

Moreover, what do we have in mind when we speak of "satisfying" a need? How far does the term "satisfaction" go? Granted that all men need a minimal amount of food, how pleasant should the food be, how varied, how bountiful? Clearly, there are large differences in what people can enjoy, and in what they may receive, within the framework of providing a minimal amount to all. And their subjective satisfactions from receiving the same amount also differ. It appears to me, therefore, that the

argument that all men should be insured of the minimal conditions of a decent life is an argument for equality only in a highly attenuated sense. It is really an argument simply for a more adequate welfare state, which is not quite the same thing. What is opposed is not inequality but human suffering and insecurity. The defense of the ideal of equality which consists in saying that it asks nothing more than universal guarantees of minimal satisfaction of basic needs really consists in abandoning the ideal of equality for the defense of something else that seems less debatable.

d) Finally, as has already become plain, distributive equality focuses on *needs*. But why should we speak of equal distribution relative to needs, rather than, for example, to performance? Indeed, do not many men feel a need to be recognized for their performance? Why, then, when we speak of the requirement to satisfy human needs equally, do we overlook this need? But if this is a need, is there not a need for the recognition of human inequality? For performances differ. Once again we face the apparent implication that the call for equality is not what it seems. It is not even-handed; it expresses a bias for some needs and some people and against other needs and other people. It seems to be, in a word, simply a demand to replace one kind of inequality with another kind.

II

So we come to the notion of equality of opportunity. For it is to this notion that philosophers and ordinary men have commonly turned to bail them out of the difficulties in which the ideal of equality, taken by itself, appears to land them. The central place that equality of opportunity occupies in the analysis and defense of equality is well illustrated in the following passage from Brian Barry's book, *Political Argument:*

> Those who wish to disparage the distributive principle of equality often seek to do so by suggesting that its adherents are committed to holding either that men *are* 'equal' in their personal characteristics or that they *ought* to be 'equal'. Then, since 'equality of personal characteristics' does not seem to make much sense it is suggested that equalitarians presumably mean 'identical' when they say 'equal'. As this idea is absurd, too, distributive equality can be conveniently dismissed as an unintelligible concept. . . . What equality 'really means' it is claimed is that some reason or other must be adduced to justify treating people differently. The incoherence, however, lies not in the concept of equality, but in the hostile formulation itself. To say that people should be equal is to say that their opportunities for satisfying whatever wants they may happen to have should be equal. Whether or not one agrees with the claim in any particular case, it surely cannot be denied that it is a reasonably intelligible one, and one not involving any implausible prescriptions or descriptions involving uniformity or identity.[7]

To invoke the notion of equality of opportunity seems to be to take care of a number of problems. It takes account of the diversity of human wants

7. Brian Barry, *Political Argument* (New York, 1965), p. 120.

and capacities. It answers the question as to just what it is, among all the possible goods of life, that should be equally distributed. And it explains both why inequality and difference may be accepted and what the limits to such acceptance should be in a just society. It thus appears to fill major gaps in the argument for equality.

Let us turn, therefore, and inspect this idea. Does it in fact perform these services? If we take Mr. Barry's formulation of the idea, it does so only on condition that we do not take it quite literally. We must read certain limitations into it. "To say that people should be equal," according to Barry, "is to say that their opportunities for satisfying whatever wants they may happen to have should be equal." He goes on to say that, even if we do not agree with this claim, it is at least "reasonably intelligible," and does not involve "any implausible prescriptions or descriptions involving uniformity or identity." But this is so, I believe, only if we silently decide that it does not mean certain things.

1. First of all, we would have to mean only *legitimate* wants. It would be quite implausible to argue, in the name of equality of opportunity, that a man who wants to torture all people over thirty ought to have an equal opportunity to satisfy this want with a man who wants, say, to support his aged parents. I recognize, to be sure, that moral standards are changing, so that, for all I know, this example may be infelicitous. Still, I take it that no one who says that men should have equal opportunities to satisfy whatever wants they may happen to have really means "whatever wants" without qualification. We cannot accept equality of opportunity unless we accept certain moral standards, above and beyond it, which limit its field of operation.

2. The restrictions which we must silently read into the conception of equality of opportunity go beyond the notion of morally legitimate wants. It is possible to have wants that are not in themselves morally illegitimate, but that are unrealistic. A man may want to be universally liked; he may want an economic system about which no one at all will complain; he may want a university which devotes its major energies to political activity, but which is at the same time a congenial place for skeptical dialogue and purely theoretical inquiries. Clearly, no human arrangement can give equality of opportunity to satisfy such wants. We implicitly exclude from the list of wants that people ought to have an opportunity to satisfy, I assume, those wants which no one can satisfy. Not that this prevents people from having such wants, from pushing for their satisfaction, or from demanding equality of opportunity to do so. But demands for the satisfaction of such unrealistic wants are nevertheless unacceptable. Ought implies can, and equality of opportunity does not provide an escape clause from this maxim.

3. These restrictions on equality of opportunity are fairly obvious. However, they lead to another which is less so and which suggests that the

concept of equality of opportunity is somewhat more puzzling, or at any rate more complicated, than Barry's words suggest.

There are many human wants which are not unrealistic in the absolute sense we have described: conditions can be defined, that is to say, under which they could be satisfied, and these conditions are not impossible to create. However, it would be extremely costly to do so. To take an example which, unfortunately, is not at all hypothetical, consider the supersonic transport plane. It is easily possible to create conditions in which people who want to fly from New York to California in two hours will have an opportunity to do so equal to the opportunity of those who are content to make the journey in five. But is it worth it? What is the cost to the nervous systems of people on the ground, and to other social needs which have been subordinated to this one? And obviously, many other examples can be given, a good portion of them no more imaginary.

It seems to me highly doubtful, therefore, that anyone who asks for equality of opportunity can consistently mean to say that he wants a society in which people's opportunities for satisfying whatever wants they may happen to have will be equal. Human wants conflict; they are multiple and insatiable; resources, if only the resources of human time and energy, are always scarce in relation to them. Some general system of social cost accounting, which assigns different values to the satisfaction of different wants, therefore has to be employed. This represents a substantial limitation on the ideal of equality of opportunity.

4. In addition to these qualifications that have to be introduced into the conception of equality of opportunity, there is still another issue. The idea as it is normally used is ambiguous. It points in two directions. Sometimes we invoke it to condemn a situation in which people are unable to satisfy their wants, but sometimes we invoke it to condemn a situation in which they are satisfying the wrong wants, or not sufficiently ambitious ones.

Thus, it is easier for the child of a working-class family to drop out of school than for a middle-class child; but the working-class child does not suffer from inequality of opportunity in the sense we have so far been discussing it, because dropping out of school is what he wants to do. In fact, it is the middle-class child who is more likely to be suffering from inequality so defined, since there are many more in this category who want to leave school but are unable to do so. Yet most egalitarians offer such facts as these as evidence of inequality of opportunity for workers and hold that in some way it should be rectified. Their complaint, therefore, is not about unequal opportunity to satisfy the wants that people happen to have; it is about unequal opportunity to develop the right wants. Eliza Doolittle had no desire to speak the king's English; she was perfectly content speaking the English she did until Professor Higgins got hold of her. But this is precisely what proves that she did not have equality of opportunity with Professor Higgins. So there are not only moral standards

and considerations of social cost that affect our notion of equality of opportunity. Cultural standards and notions of human potentialities may also be part of it.

Nor can it be argued, so far as I can see, that the notion of equality of opportunity cannot or should not be extended in this way. We do not condemn oppressive environments only because people feel oppressed inside them; we condemn them even when their victims do not feel oppressed. We do so because we think that it adds to the evil of an environment that it crushes people's power to imagine other possibilities and renders them wholly accepting of their condition. Equality of opportunity, in consequence, may quite properly lean on a conception of human or social excellence; but when it does, we cannot evaluate the demand for equality of opportunity without evaluating that conception. And it becomes different from the flatter conception of equal opportunity, conceived as opportunity to satisfy existing wants.

5. If ambiguities arise when we look at "wants," equivalent ambiguities emerge when we focus on the notion of "opportunity." Indeed, its ambiguity explains, I believe, some of our bitterest social controversies.

An example will help to bring out this ambiguity. Most people would agree, I think, that it would be odd for me to complain that I never had an equal opportunity with Mickey Mantle to play center field for the Yankees. Of course, I never did have an equal chance. But the competition for center fielder of the Yankees is perfectly fair; it is based on a test of capacities for the position and nothing else; anyone may enter the competition, and, in fact, great efforts are made to see that everyone qualified does enter; and, apart from unforeseeable accidents, the only thing that makes a difference is a man's ability. All that separates me from Mickey Mantle is my inability to compete with him, and since this is all that separates me, I may complain about my fate, but I cannot complain of inequality of opportunity. For when we speak of equality of opportunity to achieve something we set a man's abilities aside in estimating his chances and refer only to his chances to use them.

But much depends, therefore, on the notion of "ability." And here there is an equivocation. Suppose it were the case, to return to my disappointment, that I really could have competed successfully with Mickey Mantle, but that, being a city boy, I was discouraged from a very early age from doing so. My parents put other goals before me; there was not enough open space to play; my companions were an improperly motivated group who never offered me competition sufficient to challenge me, and who, in fact, often preferred to read books. Had these circumstances been different, I would have given Mickey Mantle a hard time. I had the native ability, and I was simply a victim of circumstance. If all this were the case, why could I not complain that I never had equality of opportunity with Mickey Mantle? Why, indeed, do people so tamely accept the proposition that I did have an equal chance and that the best man simply won?

We begin to see what has happened here in this extension of this example, and in my movement from a mood of resignation to one of rebellion, by noticing that we use the term "ability" in at least two different contexts. There are contexts in which the primary desideratum is performance, here and now. In these contexts we use the term "ability" to refer to a man's general quality of performance. And in these terms, I had an equal opportunity to show my ability with Mickey Mantle. But there are other contexts in which the primary desideratum is developmental, educational, the evoking of potentialities. And in these contexts—for example, in schools—we commonly distinguish between an individual's "natural ability," as revealed by diagnostic tests or other means, and his actual performance. And when he performs at a level lower than his abilities we explain this in terms of his environment, or motivation, or physical health, or some other factor presumably extraneous to his ability. All these factors, of course, have something to do with his total performance; they make him, in fact, unable to do better than he is doing. Yet we do not say that he does not have the ability. For in these educational contexts what we do is to distinguish between two kinds of factors involved in performance, one which is modifiable and the other which is not, except within narrow limits. And we call the latter kind of factor "natural ability."

Thus, just as there arise different practical conceptions of equality of opportunity depending on whether we are talking about wants as they exist or wants as they should be, so there also arise different conceptions of equality of opportunity depending on whether we are stressing performance or the development of individual potentialities. If we stress the former, we arrive at what may be called the "meritocratic" conception of equality of opportunity. It holds that tests should be fair, that they should be open to everyone, that lack of money or other physical hindrances should not be a barrier to taking them, and that people should then be graded and rewarded in terms of their performance. So interpreted, equality of opportunity is entirely compatible with sharp hierarchical differences in society so long as there is also social mobility. It simply consists in the claim that social differentiation should be based on reasonable and objective principles, and that individuals should move up and down the hierarchy in accordance with their performance. It says nothing about the need to eliminate sharp distinctions, except insofar as this may be necessary to give everybody the same chance to compete.

Yet, clear as this "meritocratic" conception seems, it fades at the edges when it is pushed. If it seems unfair—an inequality of opportunity—that a man should not be able to take a test for a position he wants because he cannot afford to travel to the testing place—and most advocates of meritocracy would accept this as unfair—why is it not also unfair for a man to be deprived of the opportunity to prepare himself for such a test because he cannot get the necessary education? And if it is a mark of

unequal opportunity to allow a man to be deprived of an education from which he would benefit when such an education is available to others, why is it not equally an example of unequal opportunity to leave him in an environment that deprives him even of the desire to seek such an education?

Thus, we move gradually to another conception of equality of opportunity—what I think might be called the "educational" conception. It looks upon the meritocratic approach as stilted, narrow, and coldly artificial. It condemns it for taking people simply as they are, for judging them in terms of their performance without asking what it is that makes one man perform better than another. Equality of opportunity means that men shall not be limited except by their abilities; the advocate of the "educational" conception of equality of opportunity holds that we cannot have real equality of opportunity unless we successfully modify those aspects of the individual's situation which prevent him from performing up to the level of his natural abilities.

III

Is there any way of adjudicating between these two conceptions? Not, so far as I can see, in a wholesale manner. There is no formula that allows us to settle the matter a priori. We have to proceed case by case. For, if I am right in saying that these two versions of equality of opportunity emerge out of different contexts in which different purposes are primary, then each represents a potentially legitimate claim in the making of public policy. There are circumstances in which what we want and cannot compromise with is performance; we cannot put up with inferior airline pilots or brain surgeons on the ground that they are learning on the job. There are other circumstances in which searching for and nourishing talent is the primary requirement; we would think it foolish to tell an eight-year-old chess player that he could not play again because he had lost a game to a chess master. And in between, there are all sorts of circumstances in which a concern for efficiency and a concern for education are both possible. In such circumstances we have to decide how much weight we shall give to each.

However, if there is no defensible general formula that allows us to come down neatly on one side or the other, there are certain guidelines, I believe, that help us to adjudicate specific cases. I shall suggest what I think the principal ones are, for they also help us to see, I think, what the logic of the case for equality of opportunity, in either its meritocratic or educational version, is.

1. One guideline is cost—not only economic cost narrowly considered, but economic cost in the broader terms of human time, energy, striving, and the probabilities of disappointment as against success. Let us go back to what we have noticed about the "educational" interpretation of equality of opportunity. It rests, we have seen, on a distinction between

the individual's "natural" or "inherent" abilities, which are not subject to significant modification, and other factors which are held to be modifiable. But terms like "modifiable" and "unmodifiable" very often express only a difference in degree, and not a difference in kind. What is the cost, for example, of changing an individual's early environment as against, say, changing his genetic constitution? In the light of new developments in biology, it may some day be easier and less costly to change the genetic constitution of individuals. The language of "natural abilities" is likely in these circumstances to become even fuzzier than it now is. It is possible that we shall begin to talk of an individual's "natural abilities" in terms of those aspects of his personality which are determined by his early upbringing, rather than in terms of those that are genetically determined.

More to the immediate point, this example brings out the fact that while, in abstract principle, environmental factors are subject to modification, it is often extremely difficult to do so in practice. How do government, or the school, or organized psychological counseling, successfully intervene in methods of child-rearing affecting, for instance, the first three crucial months of the individual's life? How can the habits, fears, images of authority, and unconscious drives of the mother—or of the stand-in parents in the public institutions that might be created—be effectively changed? Despite extravagant claims, we do not really know very much about how to do this in a practical way. And what we do know indicates that it probably lies beyond our existing resources in people, funds, and general patience and goodwill. Certain limits, therefore, have to be placed on the applicability of the broad "educational" version of equality of opportunity. We can adopt it only to the extent that we can envisage circumstances that are, for practical purposes, modifiable, and that we think are worth modifying, given the cost.

There are, therefore, general differences in the way in which poor and rich societies normally construe equality of opportunity. In a poor society, at any rate one seriously committed to escaping from poverty, successful performance is urgently needed and false steps are costly. It is natural, therefore, that a meritocratic version of equality of opportunity usually takes hold in such societies, and that there should be a tendency in them to act on the principle that the race should go to the swift. This has happened in socialist societies as well as in nonsocialist ones. In richer societies, in contrast, the ampler, more educational view of equality of opportunity has a better chance to prevail. Even in a rich society, however, there are limits. If, for example, a society is able to obtain an adequate supply of first-rate mathematicians by relying on those who emerge, with no special educational effort, from the more favored classes of the population, how much should it expend to change the environment of poor people so that they make a proportionate contribution of mathematicians? The answer to this question is an open one. It involves the specification—a very difficult one—of a variety of costs on both sides of the issue: on one

side, for example, the cost of maintaining an opportunity structure that limits horizons, or the cost of a socially insulated scientific elite; on the other side, the cost of undertaking experiments that may not work, or the limits on the need of the society for mathematicians, etc. These are very difficult issues to weigh, but they are examples of the kind of issue that has to be weighed when we try to determine whether the educational or meritocratic version of equality of opportunity should be stressed in a particular situation.

2. A second issue that emerges, as may already be evident, is an issue of morals, or at least of mores. The question of what is or is not modifiable, of what is or is not "natural ability," turns, in part, on what men choose to think should be modified, and what they place beyond the realm of organized social attack. As Plato pointed out, if we really want everyone to begin at the same place, so that only "natural abilities" control the outcome, there is one thing we must absolutely do—abolish the family and bring people up in public institutions. The family makes a more immediate difference than anything else in determining the individual's life chances. Unless we are ready to deny the institution of the family the special protections we now assign to it, only some of the inequalities associated with family origins (and, exceptional cases apart, probably not the most important) can be changed. The justification of any particular demand for equality of opportunity in the broad nonmeritocratic sense depends on whether the demand touches on fundamental matters of this sort and on the degree to which we are willing and able to do something about them.

3. A third issue has to do with the standards by which we measure either performance or ability. Let us take as an example the volatile issue of equality of educational opportunity. It has been said with increasing frequency in Europe recently in relation to the de facto segregation of social classes in the schools, and with equal or greater frequency in the United States in relation to our racial problems, that equality of educational opportunity is in effect denied because, in measuring "ability" or "performance," we do so by standards that are culturally biased: they are bourgeois, or white middle class, or something of the sort. Accordingly, those coming from other milieux cannot usually compete successfully; and, in any case, it is an imposition to ask them to compete, since the standards in question are legitimate only in terms of social purposes that are not theirs. Equality of opportunity therefore entails, it is argued, changing the nature of the standards applied to those who are disadvantaged.

Here again the issue is one, I believe, of striking a balance. Where the needs of people in different social groups are different, and where their aptitudes lie in different areas, there is a legitimate claim that standards should be modified to take these into account. However, the degree of legitimacy of this claim is limited by the answers we give to other questions: To what extent are we willing to create an educational system that

will fix most people in separate social or ethnic groups? And to what extent are the needs and aptitudes we are asked to take into account needs and aptitudes that, in the long-run, are socially and historically viable? For the argument that standards should be modified for the sole and sufficient reason that they do not fit the distinctive situation of a given group rests on at least two fallacies.

It assumes, to begin with, that all the standards employed are culturally biased. But this is not so unless we are prepared to say that there is such a thing as bourgeois mathematical logic or white middle-class astronomy. At least some intellectual disciplines are cross-cultural, and standards of performance or ability developed in relation to them are also cross-cultural in validity, even if not in their origins. Moreover, the claim that because workers and bourgeois, or blacks and whites, differ in cultural tastes and aptitudes in certain respects, they differ in all respects, is a non sequitur, and plainly an exaggeration.

Second, even if we agree that many tests of school performance or ability are culturally biased, which I think we must admit, this does not prove that individuals coming from different cultural backgrounds should not be measured by them. It is possible that they should be measured by them in their own interest. Ability in arithmetic, for example, is a bourgeois value. But if ability in arithmetic is useful to any citizen of an industrial society, then it is a reasonable standard to expect any citizen to meet. This does not preclude also varying educational requirements where the long-range needs of different individuals or groups are different. Nor does it preclude the criticism and correction of educational standards when these are culturally biased to no good point. But equality of opportunity remains a demand we can evaluate only if we ask: Equality of opportunity for what?

IV

It is tempting to stop here, for this essay is already long. However, if I were to do so, I would stop before a final and crucial feature of the ideal of equality of opportunity had been discussed. It is a feature that the ideal of equality of opportunity shares with all other social ideals. I have said that the merits of applying it, and the kind of interpretation we give it in particular cases, depend on the nature of the particular cases and on the answers we give to a broad array of highly complicated factual and moral questions. In relation to making specific decisions about public policy, that is perhaps all that needs to be said. However, decision making goes on in a broader environment, which puts pressure on decision makers and affects the general trend of their decisions. And in this broader environment, generalized social ideals, not carefully modified and qualified to take account of different individual cases, play a crucial role. So we cannot ask about a social ideal simply what it means in particular cases; we have to ask what its general tendency to influence policy is.

More specifically, an ideal like equality of opportunity serves two broad and general purposes above and beyond functioning as a claim that has to be adjudicated in specific contexts. It serves, first, as a rough-and-ready rule of thumb which gives an initial bias to the answers decision makers give and which they use because they require such a bias. One need only recall the sort of questions which, if my analysis has been right, must be asked when specific decisions about equality of opportunity are made. They are questions inviting attention to such a broad range of facts and values and raising so many issues to which the answers must in part be speculative that it is difficult to see how any determinate answer can be given to them, unless, on principle, we are inclined to lean in one direction or another and to take a chance on one hypothesis rather than another. And this in fact we do, and have no alternative but to do. For we can suspend belief when we do not know enough, but we cannot suspend decision. And so, consciously or unconsciously, we have to make certain general decisions of principle—not decisions about unbreakable or absolute principles, but decisions about guiding principles. The principle (or principles) of equality of opportunity is an answer to such a requirement. It loads the dice for us, because we need the dice loaded.

The second function of such an ideal is a related one. Public decisions are made in situations marked by massive, conflicting pressures. Established positions resist decisions that strike out along new paths; established habits of thought pose the issues in one way and ignore facts and possibilities that can be seen from other perspectives. On the other side, new congeries of power and interest push out in other directions; and new ideas function to weaken the hold of inherited habits. Decisions are made in these circumstances; and much depends, therefore, on the general drift of sentiment and aspiration and on the ways in which it comes to seem legitimate initially to pose an issue. It is this that can be affected by broad social ideals and by the decisions we make, as philosophers, educators, lawyers, or ordinary citizens, to support one general ideal as against another.

For social principles have a tendency to spread out, to spill over into areas different from those in which they were generated, to raise analogies where they were not suspected before, and, in general, to make trouble where it was not contemplated that they would. We may say that this comes from interpreting these ideals loosely and forgetting the circumstances with respect to which they were developed. Perhaps so; but the fact remains that this is what happens, and so we have to take it into account when we formulate or promulgate an ideal. The ideal that wins out tells us what general sort of question to ask of the status quo, what general sort of moral pressure to put it under, in what direction, as a broad matter, we should try to move it. Accordingly, beyond asking what a particular ideal means in particular contexts of decision making, we have to ask whether we are willing to live with it as a not quite tamed, freely roaming creature whose existence affects the general atmosphere.

If we raise these very general considerations, my own sympathies go to the broader, "educational" view of equality of opportunity. Its function is to call attention, at least indirectly, to the fact that situations with educational (or miseducational) components occur much more frequently than is usually recognized, and that more weight should be given to the educational aspects of such situations than has been given in the past. Part of the logic of such an assertion is, presumably, that this will also, in the long run, increase the efficiency of performance in the society at large. But another of the reasons for betting on it is that it implicitly proposes that we consider other values besides industrial productivity, narrowly conceived, in measuring the worth of a society. It asks us to consider the impact of the society on the formation and development of personality. It proposes a humanistic and not a technological notion of efficiency.

This does not mean that we need formulate this ideal, even for general purposes, in unguarded terms. Social ideals that unloose overreaching expectations have cruel consequences. It is clearly unacceptable to adopt the ideal of "educational" equality of opportunity in the extreme form in which it is sometimes stated, so that all differences in the average achievement of different social classes are put down to remediable conditions which the political process, the courts, other organized social agencies, or perhaps a revolutionary movement, have an obligation to remove. The ideal of "educational" equality of opportunity should be taken to state a direction of effort, not a goal to be fully achieved. In education itself, for example, it cannot be taken to call for equality of achievement by all individuals, but only for comparable levels of average achievement in different social classes.[8] And even this can only be rough comparability, a matter of more or less, for it is not possible for schools to counteract entirely the differential influence of specific environments, nor does any society know how to do this except within certain limits.[9]

As a practical matter, therefore, "equality of opportunity" calls not for uniformity, either of environment or achievement. It calls for the diversification of opportunities, the individualization of attention in schools and work places, the creation of conditions making it easier for people to shift directions and try themselves out in new jobs or new milieux, and a general atmosphere of tolerance for a plurality of value-schemes insofar as this is feasible. Such a practical policy goes beyond the narrow meritocratic conception. It would require, and it would pre-

8. See James S. Coleman, "The Concept of Equality of Educational Opportunity," in *Equal Opportunity*, ed. *Harvard Educational Review* staff (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969).

9. For example, if new methods of instruction are discovered which make it easier to raise students' reading capacities, the more favored classes will benefit as much as the poorer classes, and perhaps more, since they are likely to be able to exploit these methods sooner and to have less resistance to them. Thus, the gap between the richer and poorer classes in reading ability may remain, even though the average for the whole society has been raised.

sumably lead to, a greater equalizing of social conditions. But it would not promise a state of affairs in which it was just as easy for those less favored by circumstance as for those more favored to satisfy whatever wants they may happen to have.

A man does not have to be poor to be disadvantaged; he merely needs to be poorer than somebody else. And while we can eliminate differences in pecuniary income if we decide to, we cannot eliminate other important differences in circumstances unless we wish to adopt the principle that parents should not feel any special devotion to their own children and should be prevented from passing on to them what advantages in motivation, knowledge, or personal associations they may happen to possess. I am inclined to think this is not a practical principle. I am even more persuaded that it is not a desirable one. So equality of opportunity, as a matter of policy, should aim at striking a mean between the "meritocratic" and "educational" versions of the ideal. But, to maintain the Aristotelian analogy, it should lean a bit in one direction; that direction, I think, should be toward the broader "educational" version.

But why care about "equality of opportunity" at all? Why care about "equality"? At the level of broad and general choice between ideals, why make this choice? I come here to my concluding remarks, and they can only suggest another essay; they cannot be that essay. So I will only say, without the argument that is required, that the case for equality does not seem to me to be a demonstrative case. It does not follow deductively from any first principles. It comes from the connection of equality with a whole cluster of other values. It comes from its practical implications, if we believe in it and act on it, for our other attitudes. The case for equality is not equality in itself. It is the value of liberty, diversity, and, most of all, fraternity. Within broad limits (of which we should try to be aware) equality promotes these values.

Antiegalitarians from Plato to Mencken have alleged that the demand for "equality" is often only the disguised expression of envy, the inferior man's way of taking revenge on his betters. They have said that the pursuit of distributive equality can lead to suspicion toward distinction and hostility to firm standards. Tocqueville further observed that it can lead to the loneliness, anxiety, and pressures to conformity that mark societies in which class lines are vague and individuals cannot be sure where they belong or who are their kind of people.

I think there is some truth in these arguments. Yet those who have made them have almost invariably been unfair. They have taken egalitarianism as a free-roaming social ideal and compared it in its worst manifestations with aristocratic notions at their best. They have overlooked the fact that the latter may also run out of control and usually do, and that, under these circumstances, they stand, not for recognition of excellence, but for privilege, oligarchy, and fear of new forms of human achievement. We must compare egalitarians at their worst with the aristocrats whom Milton described as "drunk on wine and insolence."

Moreover, the opponents of egalitarianism, with the prominent exception of Tocqueville, have missed its special grace and charm. It can, at its best, make all men the objects of a common friendly regard. And even at its middling best, when it is pushing and competitive, it produces the sense that doors are open and that no one need be shut out. It thus gives practical substance to guarantees of liberty, and at least one kind of reality to the hope for fraternity. And by encouraging people with talent to think they have a chance to use it, it probably contributes to the general development of talent in society. Not least, though it encourages hostility toward those who stand out from the crowd, it also invites a mixing of human types and a steady challenge to conventional standards of ability and achievement that bring excitement and variety to human experience.

Indeed, although the egalitarian is often considered excessively worldly, and too much focused on material concerns, there is an other-worldly aspect to egalitarianism. It looks ironically on worldly distinctions; it pronounces all titles, ranks, and stigmata of achievement to be things of limited and equivocal significance; it is the enemy of pomposity. Of all social outlooks, it is, therefore, the most congenial, probably, to the flowering of compassion.