

The single Defendable Interpretation of Equal Opportunity within Liberalism

The concept of equal opportunity is first and foremost a puzzling ideal which led several contributors to claim that it should be prevented from doing any moral work at all. The aim of this paper is to show, that, once the mistiness of the concept is clarified, there is only one defendable interpretation of the ideal within liberalism; namely fair equal opportunity as late Rawls defended it: A combination of formal and substantial equal opportunity.

Most commonly equal opportunity is taken to be an egalitarian ideal. However, several egalitarian positions advance an absolute rather than a comparative (egalitarian) standard. Some contributors defend equal opportunity with focus on its probability aspect. Others defend it with regard to means. Additionally, there is Rawls famous distinction between formal and substantial (fair) equal opportunity. These distinctions leave us with eight possible interpretations of equal opportunity. There are four interpretations of formal and four of substantial equal opportunity.

Taken, that liberalism defends liberty and equal respect as core ideals, it can be shown that only four of the eight possible interpretations are defendable within liberalism. Two drop out because they conflict with liberty. Another two must be accused of being aristocratic. One formal and one substantial interpretation of equal opportunity drop out, because they conflict with liberty. One interpretation of formal equal opportunity conflicts with liberty, because it assumes fixed outcomes to be necessary to defend equal opportunity. One interpretation of substantial equal opportunity conflicts with liberty, because it assumes an objectively fixed opportunity range to be ensured. As to the two interpretations which are aristocratic, there is again one formal and one substantial interpretation of equal opportunity which must be discarded. One interpretation of formal equal opportunity is aristocratic, because it allows for exclusion with regard to achieved skills. One substantial interpretation is aristocratic, because it allows adapting the opportunity range to be ensured to socioeconomic circumstances.

Even though the four interpretations left are defendable within liberalism, some qualifications will show why only one interpretation of equal opportunity combining two of the four defendable interpretations can be defended as independent ideal. Are formal and substantial equal opportunity defended as ideals with the same extension as liberty they are reducible to that very ideal. With regard to positive liberty this same is true, if equal opportunity is defended as an absolute substantial standard. Is formal equal opportunity defended solely as claiming equal rights for access to goods, it is reducible to negative liberty. Therefore substantial equal opportunity has to be defended as comparative standard. Formal equal opportunity may either be defended as an absolute, competitive standard or as a comparative standard. Either way, both these interpretations are dependent on substantial equal opportunity because without guaranteeing fair starting positions both these interpretations would discriminate against the socioeconomically bad off. Thus, equal opportunity is only defendable as a combination of formal and substantial equal opportunity, what was Rawls claim when defending fair equal opportunity in his *Justice as Fairness: a Restatement*.