

*How Can the Pursuit of Equal Opportunity Be Reasonable in Education?:
A Perspective from the Rawlsian Theory of Justice*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to elaborate a reasonable principle of equal opportunity in education through a reinterpretation of John Rawls' theory of justice. To do so, firstly, I point out that there have been disagreements on the definition of the concept of equal opportunity in education, and the difficulties this concept entails. Secondly, I introduce Rawls' theory of justice and clarify the implications of his principles of justice for educational systems. Finally, I examine the criticisms of Rawls' principles of justice, and thereby show the possibility that his theory of justice will avoid the difficulties of the pursuit of equal opportunity in education. This paper concludes that securing people's self-respect is essential in pursuing equal opportunity in education according to Rawls' theory of justice, and providing freedom is the indispensable means by which self-respect can be achieved.

Keywords: equality of educational opportunity, John Rawls, self-respect, freedom

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Introduction: Difficulties of the pursuit of equal opportunity in education

The significance of establishing good and just educational systems is widely recognized in today's world, and there are many ideals educational systems should achieve. The idea of equal opportunity is one of these ideals. However, there have been disagreements on the definition of the concept of equal educational opportunity, and serious doubts have been raised that the pursuit of equal opportunity in education is even desirable.

Although the concept of equal educational opportunity appears to be simple and clear, historically, various definitions of this concept have been raised and examined.¹ For purposes of this paper, from the body of all the definitions put forward, three simplified, but typical, interpretations will be examined. Firstly, some might see equal opportunity as formal or legal rights to access education for all. This may be the most minimal and basic view on equal opportunity. However, since this interpretation mentions nothing about the conditions of schooling, such as curriculum, educational equipment or government expenditure, it would amount to a vague concept or, at best, a concept only certain libertarians would support. Thus, a second interpretation is the substantive view, which means providing equal input, such as a common curriculum and equal educational resources, to each student. This view, however, may be inadequate to support students who need more resources than others, such as those in severe poverty or those having a physical or mental handicap. As well, some could object that it is insufficient to prevent the reproduction of class or social inequality. Therefore, thirdly, there are egalitarian versions of equal opportunity. Some contemporary egalitarians claim that students should have equal prospects of educational achievements irrespective of their social class or, even more radically, their natural talents. Although there are a number of dissenting voices in the camp, contemporary egalitarians generally think that people's voluntary choices or efforts should be relevant to their prospects but that the effects of other factors, which people are not responsible for, should be equalized. The argument for 'educational equality' by Harry Brighouse (2010) can be seen as a representative and sophisticated example of such egalitarian versions of equal opportunity. Thus, disagreements on the definition of the concept of equal educational opportunity persist. However, the pursuit of equal opportunity is ultimately inclined to favor egalitarian versions because these types of equal opportunity seem to reflect a common intuition on social justice, and therefore, the following argument will consider the problems egalitarian versions of equal opportunity entail.

Even if there were an agreement on the definition of the concept, the pursuit of equal opportunity would still be faced with serious difficulties. There are basically two kinds of difficulties from a normative perspective. One is the relationship between equality and other values, such as family values, educational excellence, and benefiting the least advantaged (Brighouse, 2010). As the achievement of complete equality would not be possible without disregarding family values, there are always potential conflicts among these values. Thus, the order and the degrees of priority of these values must be considered. The other is leveling down objection, which is an intrinsic difficulty of pursuing equality. Historically, critics of egalitarianism have,

¹ For example of specific definitions, see Coleman (1968); Evetts (1970).

more or less, cited this difficulty to cast doubt on the desirability of pursuing equality, and therefore, this paper will mainly focus on addressing the leveling down objection.

Leveling down also has at least two versions in education.² Firstly, if some think that equality is intrinsically valuable, and sees it as the sole criterion to consider, a logically possible way to achieve it is to lower the academic standards. For instance, in a system where there are two students, but their prospects are at different levels due to the effects of social class or natural talents. On the other hand, in another system, policies disadvantageous to the advantaged student have been adopted, so that the prospect of the advantaged student has been lowered to the level both students can equally achieve. Thus, if some only see an intrinsic value in equality, the latter system would be better than the former. However, this solution is counterintuitive and most people would rarely accept it. This is a case of leveling down, which makes pursuing equal opportunity unreasonable.

The second version is even more common as a criticism of egalitarianism: the inefficient allocation of educational resources. For instance, in order to realize equal prospects for achievements irrespective of social class or natural talents, huge amounts of educational resources may need to be spent on improving the least advantaged students. However, this spending might fail to contribute enough improvement, and thereby, excessive investment could result in a shortage of resources and an overall decrease of academic standards. This case is partly matter of fact, which cannot be affirmed without empirical studies, and, strictly speaking, is not the intrinsic difficulty of the logic of egalitarianism. However, it is often brought up as an objection to egalitarian versions of equal opportunity.

Overall, although only two cases have been shown, these cases clearly show the typical but serious doubts cast on egalitarianism in education. Therefore, it would be quite a meaningful task for philosophical and normative study to elaborate a reasonable principle of equal opportunity in education. In the following sections, examining John Rawls' theory of justice, and reinterpreting his principles of justice will be quite useful for the task.

John Rawls' theory of justice

John Rawls was one of the most distinguished philosophers in 20th century North America. Among his many works, the original edition of *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls, 1971) will be focused on in this study. Rawls' theory of justice has been interpreted as a kind of egalitarianism in the history of debate, and the focus of many criticisms of his theory is common to the difficulties mentioned above. Thus, finding a way whereby his theory can avoid the criticisms and difficulties could be helpful in elaborating a reasonable principle of equal opportunity.

Rawls proposed two principles of justice, and argued that social institutions and policy should be designed to satisfy these two principles. The first principle can be called the Equal Liberty Principle, which basically means each person is to have an

² Two versions of leveling down objection are also distinguished in Macleod (2010). On account of leveling down as an intrinsic difficulty of egalitarianism in distributive justice, see Parfit (2000).

equal right to equal basic liberties. The second principle defines the conditions of morally permissible social and economic inequalities. Rawls argued that, while each person should have an equal right to basic liberties as suggested in the first principle, every kind of inequality is not necessarily unjust. Therefore, social and economic inequalities are to be morally permissible when the second principle is satisfied. The second principle is further divided into two parts; the principle of fair equality of opportunity (hereafter FEO) and the difference principle (hereafter DP). For the purpose of this paper, the second principle is the main focus.

Firstly, in defining FEO, Rawls (1971) writes, “[t]he thought here is that positions are to be not only open in a formal sense, but that all should have a fair chance to attain them” (p. 73). A more specific definition is the following: “assuming that there is a distribution of natural assets, *those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system*” (Rawls, 1971, p. 73, emphasis added). Thus, FEO mainly focuses on social factors, such as people’s social class backgrounds, and tries to mitigate their effects on people’s life prospects.

FEO also has some implications for educational systems. Rawls (1971) states, “[t]he elements of this framework are familiar enough, though it may be worthwhile to recall the importance of . . . *maintaining equal opportunities of education for all*. Chances to acquire cultural knowledge and skills should not depend upon one’s class position, and so *the school system, whether public or private, should be designed to even out class barriers*” (p. 73, emphasis added). In this passage, although there are still some ambiguous points, Rawls emphasizes the significance of maintaining equal opportunities of education for all, and suggests that educational systems should be designed to even out class barriers.

Secondly, there are a number of implications of applying DP. Although DP states that social and economic inequalities should be arranged to be the greatest benefit to the least advantaged, its interpretation and validity are both quite a controversial. Therefore, only one possible policy will be discussed, which is the prior distribution of educational resources to the least talented students. According to Rawls (1971), “the difference principle gives some weight to the considerations singled out by the principle of redress. . . . In pursuit of this principle [of redress] *greater resources might be spent on the education of the less rather than the more intelligent*, at least over a certain time of life, say the earlier years of school” (pp. 100-101, emphasis added). This is not the only and definitive implication, but it is certainly suggested by DP. Although the least advantaged students may be disadvantaged in both terms of social and natural factors, in contrast to FEO, DP mainly focuses on natural factors, such as student’s natural talents, and tries to mitigate their effects on their life prospects.

In addition, there is quite an important constraint on the applications of the principles of justice, which is called ‘lexical order.’ The first principle has lexical priority over the second principle, and this requires social institutions and policy to satisfy the first principle before the second principle. Likewise, within the second principle, FEO has lexical priority over DP. Therefore, DP can only be implemented after FEO has been implemented.

Criticisms of Rawls' principles of justice

Rawls' theory of justice has been criticized from many quarters, since *A Theory of Justice* was published. Correspondingly, his second principle has faced a proportional amount of criticisms, especially DP. Compared to DP, however, FEO has attracted less concern. Nevertheless, severe criticisms have been raised against FEO and its place in Rawls' theory, and their points are particularly relevant to this study.

A representative criticism of FEO can be found in the writings of Richard Arneson. Although his criticism covers several points, he points to a counterintuitive consequence of applying FEO and its lexical priority over DP. Arneson (1999) states, "Rawlsian justice demands that if by huge expenditure of resources we can offer extra education to the upper middle class youths that marginally improves their prospects of competitive success as compared with their counterparts with equal talent born into even more privileged households, we must do so" (p. 82). For instance, in a hypothetical scenario, there are three students. Two of them are at the highest talented level but their prospects are slightly different because one is from a rich family and the other is from the upper middle class. The third student is the least talented person with the fewest prospects. According to Arneson's criticism, since lexical order forbids the implementation of DP preceding FEO, the primary concern for the Rawlsian educational system would have to be equalizing the marginal difference between the higher two students, but the improvement of the least talented student would be postponed until this equalization had been done. Arneson (1999) also writes, "instead of lavishing fancy education on the upper middle class extremely talented in the setting just described, suppose that we could use the same resources to institute a tax and transfer scheme that would double the income of the (untalented) worst off members of society" (p. 82). Thus, he criticizes that the Rawlsian educational system would reject the flexible distribution of resources, but rather the prior improvement of the worst off should be just the demand of justice in this case.

This problem pointed out by Arneson can be seen as a developed version of the difficulties of pursuing equal opportunity in education. Not only FEO requires educational systems to persist in full equalization among the same talented people, but also lexical order prevents them distributing resources flexibly, however inefficient the way of distribution is, and whatever consequences will entail for other people. Thus, he proceeds to attack the grounds for the priority of FEO over DP as insufficient.³ Arneson (1999) questions, "[w]hy give any priority at all to Fair Equality when it comes into conflict with the Difference Principle" (p. 83)?

Therefore, in order to fully reply to Arneson's criticism, the grounds for the priority of FEO over DP must be firmly presented. However, for the purpose of this study, this paper examines another question, that is, whether FEO really requires educational systems to persist in such strict equalization. If the reason for pursuing FEO does not consist in strictly equalizing the marginal differences, the problem caused by FEO's prioritization would be largely mitigated. Although this strategy is not complete

³ Alexander (1986) also points to lack of the grounds for the priority of FEO over DP, and its counterintuitive implications.

answer to Arneson's criticism, and considering the grounds for the priority of FEO over DP is a task for another paper, reexamining the reason for FEO would reveal a different aspect of Rawls' principles of justice, and thereby, give suggestions to elaborate a reasonable principle of equal opportunity in education.

How Rawlsian equality of opportunity can avoid the difficulties

Before examining the main subject, a misunderstanding of FEO by Arneson's criticism should be briefly noted. Arneson (1999), to some degree, interprets FEO as a meritocratic principle, which "holds that other things being equal, those who are naturally more talented and develop their talents to higher excellence levels should enjoy greater prospects of good fortune in life" (p. 85). Quoting again, FEO certainly requires that "those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success" (Rawls, 1971, p. 73). However, it never mentions that the higher talented people should be prioritized over the less talented people, and the priority between the two groups remains open. This misinterpretation seems to lead to the emphasis of the conflicting interests between the two groups, and thereby, of the conflicting roles of FEO and DP. Contrary to this view, in the following argument, a consistent purpose of these principles would be revealed, which is securing people's self-respect through providing their spheres of freedom.

Firstly, Rawls (1971) presents the reason for FEO as follows: "[i]t expresses the conviction that if some places were not open on a basis fair to all, those kept out would be right in feeling unjustly treated even though they benefited from the greater efforts of those who were allowed to hold them. They would be justified in their complaint not only because they were excluded from certain external rewards of office such as wealth and privilege, but because they were debarred from experiencing the realization of self which comes from a skillful and devoted exercise of social duties. *They would be deprived of one of the main forms of human good*" (p. 84, emphasis added). This passage suggests that the lack of FEO may prevent people gaining not only certain rewards but also self-realization and even 'the main forms of human good.' In other words, the role of FEO does consist in enabling people to gain these goods through removing barriers, which prevent them.

Secondly, a similar type of argument can be found in DP. Concerning the prior distribution of educational resources suggested by DP, Rawls (1971) states, "the value of education should not be assessed solely in terms of economic efficiency and social welfare. Equally if not more important is the role of education in enabling a person to enjoy the culture of his society and to take part in its affairs, and *in this way to provide for each individual a secure sense of his own worth*" (p. 101, emphasis added). Thus, the significant aim of education is in enabling people to enjoy the culture, to take part in social affairs, and, ultimately, to secure their sense of one's own worth.

Therefore, this paper finds that the consistent purpose of FEO and DP is securing people's self-respect. As Rawls (1971) writes, "the most important primary good is that of self respect" (p. 440), and "it includes a person's sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of his good, his plan of life, is worth carrying

out” (p. 440), the phrases such as ‘the main forms of human good’ and ‘a secure sense of his own worth’ are thought to be equivalent to self-respect.

In addition, the spheres of freedom enabled by removing barriers would be a crucial element for securing people’s self-respect. For instance, if some are not given freedom to carry out their plans of life, this means a denial of the public recognition of their plans of life, and thereby, they would not be able to have convictions that their plans of life are worth carrying out. Thus, providing opportunities functions as a removal of barriers to their freedom, and thereby, the securing of their self-respect. Furthermore, according to Rawls (1971), “self-respect implies that a confidence in one’s ability, so far as it is within one’s power, to fulfill one’s intentions” (p. 440). Since FEO requires educational systems to provide educational opportunity for all, people can develop their ability irrespective of their social class, and this would result in expanding their spheres to be able to fulfill their intentions, and in enhancing their confidences in their ability. Likewise, the prior distribution of educational resources by DP would enable the least talented people to fulfill their intentions more broadly and surely. In any case, an indispensable element common to both FEO and DP can be found, which is a removal of external and internal barriers to fulfill people’s intentions, and this enable them to do or become something more freely.⁴

Conclusion

Overall, the consistent purpose of FEO and DP is not in strictly equalizing the marginal differences but in securing people’s self-respect through removing the external and internal barriers to their freedom. Therefore, the problem caused by FEO’ prioritization would be largely mitigated; the Rawlsian educational system would not have to persist in absurd policies, such as ‘lavishing fancy education on the upper middle class.’ Therefore, although there are still some difficulties, such as how to determine the threshold level of self-respect, this paper concludes that a more reasonable principle for the pursuit of equal opportunity in education would aim to provide the requisite spheres of freedom, which enable people to carry out their plans of life, and thereby, to secure their self-respect.

⁴ See also MacCallum’s triadic formulation of freedom; “x is (is not) free from y to do (not do, become, not become) z” (MacCallum, 1967, p. 314).

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