

EGALITARIANISM AND NATURAL LOTTERY

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INTRODUCTION

INEQUALITIES resemble Russian dolls. If you remove one source of inequality, you usually do not reach equality, but just another kind of inequality. So, when in the name of equality it was almost universally agreed that characteristics like social rank, sex or race should not be allowed to influence the allocation of jobs, and when the steps were taken to preclude this, egalitarian sentiments were soon hurt by new inequalities which were up to that time either hidden from view or simply not regarded as a social problem. Even after the defeat of open discrimination, the disturbing fact of the unequal access to education persisted and it was perceived by most as being incompatible with justice and fair competition. It was not enough that socially desirable positions be distributed according to competence; it was demanded, in addition, that everyone should have also an equal chance to acquire the necessary competence.

Differences in educational opportunity thus came into focus: they were widely assumed to be a major source of social inequalities. But some twenty years ago different lines of investigation (see Coleman *et al.* 1966; Mosteller & Moynihan 1972; Jencks *et al.* 1975; Husén 1974) showed that this assumption was highly dubious. It was discovered, first, that substantial educational improvements in the 1950s and 1960s did not reduce significantly the disparities between social strata, and secondly, that surviving educational differences did not account for much of the existing social and economic inequalities. It turned out that both educational achievement and socio-economic status were to a great extent determined by other causal factors like early family environment, inborn dispositions and luck. The belief in education as a "great equalizer" had to be abandoned.

Different sources of socio-economic inequality come to public attention one after another, according to the degree of their political urgency: first, inequalities due to outright discrimination, secondly, inequalities of educational opportunity, and thirdly, those influenced by differences in family

influence, talent or luck. Until more disturbing inequalities are removed or considerably reduced, they usually absorb all energies, keeping out of public sight other kinds of inequality. For instance, the disillusionment with the power of education was necessary for the third layer inequalities to appear on the political agenda. More specifically, it was only fairly recently that inequalities arising from the differences in innate abilities came to be regarded as a political problem. And it is exactly this type of inequality that is the topic of this paper.

NATURAL LOTTERY

It was a great disappointment for many that anti-discrimination political measures and educational reforms had fallen so far behind expectations in reducing socio-economic inequalities. As a consequence, moral indignation was sometimes simply transferred to the remaining inequalities, although their sources (e.g. advantages of family environment or talent) have for a long time been generally regarded as morally unobjectionable.

Apparently, people with egalitarian leanings would find it easier to tolerate persevering inequalities if only they were somehow made smaller; their sheer magnitude is what tends to make their origin ethically suspect in advance. Interestingly, Robert Young has even explicitly argued that our attitude toward inequalities of natural endowments should crucially depend on the fact how "massive" these inequalities really are. According to him, resolving the empirical disagreement over the actual extent of inequality in natural talent "would obviously make a lot of difference to how much of a role desert should be given" (Young 1992, p. 329). It is doubtful, however, that our moral evaluations can be in this way "relational" and "frequency dependent." For if they were, it would mean that in order to see whether I deserve A it would be first necessary to find out whether more than a critical number of other people have similar grounds for claiming to deserve A. Moreover, a very same kind of advantage that were up to a certain time deserved could cease to be so merely because it became *less rare*.

It is ironical that contemporary egalitarians find differences in talents so embarrassing if we recall that, historically, egalitarians themselves demanded the removal of all impediments to the full expression of different natural abilities. So, one of the pillars of the eighteenth century egalitarianism was the thought that persons are entitled to the fruits of the exercise of their personal capacities and talents. Also, when the principle of ascription of the old regime was replaced by the principle of achievement, this was done under the slogan "Careers open to talent." The French Declaration of the Rights of Man proclaimed that all citizens "are equally eligible to all honors, places and employments, according to their different abilities, without any other distinction than that of their virtues and talents." And it was from the

very idea of human equality that Immanuel Kant derived the following maxim with a similar content: "*Jedes Glied [des gemeinen Wesens] muß zu jeder Stufe eines Standes. . . gelangen dürfen, wozu ihn sein Talent, sein Fleiß und sein Glück hinbringen können*" (Kant 1965, p. 82).

In our times, however, the egalitarian impulse advanced so far that in the end it was frustrated by its own success. After many obstacles to the development of talent were by and large removed in accordance with egalitarian demands, today it is precisely the residual inequalities due to different natural endowments that come to be seen as particularly repugnant. John Rawls thinks that differences in natural endowments are "arbitrary from a moral perspective" and that for this reason they should not be permitted to determine the distribution of wealth and income (Rawls 1972, p. 74); Christopher Jencks states that "for a thoroughgoing egalitarian... inequality that derives from biology ought to be as repulsive as inequality that derives from early socialization" (Jencks 1975, p. 173); in Ronald Dworkin's opinion, "the liberal... finds the market defective principally because it allows morally irrelevant differences, like differences in talent, to affect distribution, and he therefore considers that those who have less talent, as the market judges talent, have a right to some form of redistribution in the name of justice" (Dworkin 1985, p. 199, *cf.* p. 207); in a similar vein, Thomas Nagel writes: "In most societies reward is a function of demand, and many of the human traits most in demand result largely from *gifts* or *talents*. The greatest injustice in our society, I believe, is neither racial nor sexual but intellectual... When racial and sexual injustice have been reduced, we shall still be left with the great injustice of the smart and the dumb, who are so differently rewarded for comparable effort" (Nagel 1979, pp. 99, 104); this view has spread into economics, as witnessed by the following words of John Roemer: "If we consider talent a resource, the distribution of which is morally arbitrary, then one might wish to compensate those who draw a low talent in the birth lottery" (Roemer 1985, p. 163); but perhaps no one can go further than Bruce Ackerman who claimed nothing less than that "a victim of a crippling set of genetic disadvantages [would] have no difficulty establishing himself as a victim of exploitation [*sic!*] of a kind that, *prima facie*, requires special assistance in a liberal state" (Ackerman 1980, p. 267).

The views of all these authors differ, sometimes to an important degree, but their main objection to the inequalities resulting from "natural lottery" is that inborn differences are regarded as being "arbitrary from a moral point of view" (Rawls) or as a product of the morally unacceptable "brute luck" (Dworkin 1981, p. 293). To criticize this line of egalitarian thought head-on would involve us dealing with the questions of personal desert, entitlement, distributive justice, determinism, etc., and it would require a paper of its own. Instead, I shall try here a different strategy.

INEQUALITIES: FROM BIOLOGY TO ECONOMICS

To begin with, note that differences in innate abilities can have different effects. First, differences in natural talent sometimes cause differences in educational achievement. This effect, however, occasionally produces a new consequence: the differences in educational achievement caused by biological differences may lead further to occupational differences. And again, these occupational differences (ultimately caused by biological differences) could be responsible for differences in income (economic inequalities). So, biological inequalities give rise in succession to educational, occupational and economic inequalities. The egalitarian who condemns inequalities because of their biological origin is under obligation to indicate at which point in the aforementioned sequence the biologically rooted inequalities *become* morally unacceptable. To put it differently, we would simply not understand an egalitarian who came up with the claim that no particular wrong has been done at any stage but who insisted that the whole transformation is still "somehow not in order." After all, assuming that injustice has been committed and that it is to be avoided in the future, the blame must be assignable to a specific place in the scheme if we are to know where to direct our efforts to change the course of events in similar cases.

Basically, there are four lines open to the egalitarian, where to try to locate the occurrence of injustice. I shall argue, though, that any of these options leads to serious difficulties, and that they are all actually unacceptable. In this way I hope to undermine the egalitarian standpoint indirectly: by showing that the egalitarian cannot fulfil his obligation and pinpoint the morally objectionable event in the sequence of consequences of biological inequalities we obtain a strong reason to believe that his general argument must be mistaken.

Figure 1 is introduced in order to have a simple, schematic representation of the egalitarian predicament.

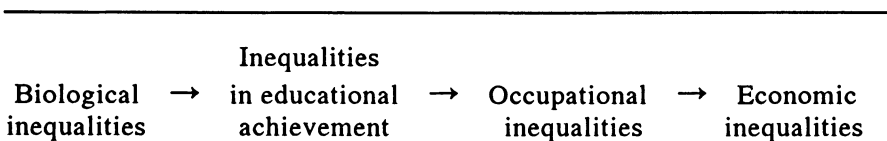


Figure 1

The arrows represent causal influences going from left to right, the earlier inequalities giving rise to the subsequent ones. It is not suggested, of course, that inequalities at a given stage always produce the next stage

inequalities, nor that the later inequalities have no other causes than those here pictured. The only assumption (a fairly plausible one, it seems) is that there is *some* causal influence flowing through the arrows, *i.e.*, that the starting innate inequalities are at least sometimes responsible for the next-stage (educational) inequalities, which themselves in turn, again at least sometimes, generate new (occupational) inequalities, and so on.

The main target of egalitarian criticism are, of course, economic inequalities. In particular, we are here interested in the opposition to the economic inequalities that are ultimately due to biological inequalities. It is easily seen from Figure 1 that the egalitarian can choose between four different ways of how to attempt to stop the process of transformation of biological inequalities into economic inequalities. He could, first, decide to strike at the root and propose to eliminate the initial biological inequalities themselves. Or, second, he could concentrate on the first arrow, and try not to permit the differences in talent to give rise to different educational achievements. The third option is to attack the second arrow, and to obstruct the transition from educational inequalities to occupational inequalities. Finally, the egalitarian could aim to preclude occupational inequalities to be “translated” into economic inequalities.

THE NATIONALIZATION OF TALENTS

Due to the initial inequality of their natural endowments different individuals have already at birth unequal life prospects. Those genetically favored have not deserved their advantages over others, and some people find this situation deeply unfair. Obviously, things cannot be here rectified directly, by distributing talents anew. Talents are sometimes designated as “non-transferable resources,” and if the unlucky ones in the birth lottery are to be compensated, they have to be paid back in some other currency. Actually, according to a very influential view in the egalitarian literature (see Dworkin 1981; Roemer 1985) those biologically underprivileged should on the account of their initial setback receive comparatively more of those social resources that *are* transferable.

The idea implicit in this approach is to treat innate *personal* abilities as *social* resources. Ideally, at least, they are thought to enter the pool of all resources, a total that is the object of social distribution. But as talents have been already arbitrarily distributed by “natural lottery,” it is argued that the care should be taken to apportion the remaining social goods in such a way that in the end all individuals come out approximately equal. It is as if the process of dividing social property has at the very beginning run out of control, so to speak. A part of the pie is already missing even before the distribution started; some persons acquired important advantages although “no one had an antecedent claim to be benefited in this way” (Rawls 1979, p. 17). Since restitution is not possible, the only thing to do is to distribute

what is left over so as to make up for the previous unjust, but irreversible inequalities.

This move has the appearance of the second-best solution: restitution is always preferable to compensation. So, what if we imagine that the *direct* redistribution of biological advantages according to “non-arbitrary” criteria (whatever that is supposed to mean) were to become feasible? And if, consequently, those who got less than the “fair share” in genetic benefits could now claim from society not the right quantity of *Ersatz* resources but the real thing? Assuming that their grievances are justified, why actually take trouble to determine what would be an adequate compensation for their condition and not give them simply what they lack? It seems that the view under consideration pulls strongly towards recognizing the legitimacy of such claims. But this conflicts with our basic moral intuitions. However much we might deplore the bad luck of the victims of “cosmic injustice,” we do not in fact believe that, on that account, they would have any claim on others in our counterfactual situation. As Gerald Cohen said:

[People] do not immediately agree that, were eye transplants easy to achieve, it would then be acceptable for the state to conscribe potential eye donors into a lottery whose losers must yield an eye to beneficiaries who would otherwise be not one-eyed but blind. The fact that they do not deserve their good eyes, that they do not need two good eyes more than blind people need one, and so forth; the fact, in a word, that they are merely lucky to have good eyes does not always convince them that their claim on their own eyes is no stronger than that of some unlucky blind person. (Cohen 1986, p. 111)

Of course, few egalitarians would favor such a nationalization of natural endowments if they became readily transferable. My point is merely that there is a strand in their argument which, if not counteracted by other considerations, leads them naturally in that direction. For example, when one speaks of the “per capita share in *all* endowments” (Roemer 1982, p. 212) or of the distribution of natural abilities as being “a collective asset” (Rawls 1972, p. 179) or “a common asset” (*ibid.*, p. 101), this comes dangerously close to expanding the scope of legitimate state intervention in the private sphere. In a way, egalitarians can afford not to be much bothered by this issue precisely because such an infringement of personal rights is at present outside the realm of serious possibility. So, by having a certain air of unreality, the disquieting implications of their standpoint fail to ring the alarm bell in our moral consciousness.

THE FIRST ARROW

If nothing is done about it some of the initial biological inequalities will eventually be translated into educational inequalities. This transition is the next step where the egalitarian can interfere in the causal chain leading to economic inequalities. The strategy calls to mind the famous Kurt

Vonnegut's story "Harrison Bergeron" where the society intervenes very early and suppresses the mere expression of superior innate abilities by imposing artificial obstacles on gifted individuals. Here is just one short passage from Vonnegut:

And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental-handicap radio in his ear—he was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter and, every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.

We all get a chill from the nightmare world of "Harrison Bergeron." But in its milder forms the idea that if the less talented cannot be brought up to the level of those better endowed, the latter should then be held back in their development for the sake of equality is not entirely without adherents. Thus, in one of the most carefully argued studies on inequality the following is what we can read about the transition from biological inequalities to inequalities of educational achievement (the first arrow in Figure 1):

A society committed to achieving full cognitive equality would, for example, probably have to exclude genetically advantaged children from school. It might also have to impose other handicaps on them, like denying them access to books and television. Virtually no one thinks cognitive equality worth such a price. Certainly we do not. *But if our goal were simply to reduce cognitive equality to, say, half its present level, instead of eliminating it entirely, the price might be much lower.* (Jencks *et al.* 1972, pp. 75-76—emphasis added)

This looks very much like trying to make a bitter pill palatable by halving it.

But even in Rawls there are ideas with a similar bent. Recall that the Difference Principle, the core of his theory of justice, says that only those inequalities are legitimate by which the worst off also benefit; significantly, it does not say, as one would perhaps expect, that legitimate inequalities are those by which the worst off are not harmed. The difference is all-important: the second (inauthentic) version protects those at the bottom by not allowing their position to be deteriorated by the improvements of others, while the first (Rawlsian) version does not allow the position of those on the top to be improved even when, *ex hypothesi*, no one is thereby made worse off.

THE SECOND ARROW

Going further to the right and considering the influence that flows through the second arrow, from inequalities in educational achievement to unequal occupations, this stage seems particularly inappropriate for egalitarian intervention. On the reasonable assumption that educational achievement predicts future competence, those who would wish to stop the unfolding of initial inequalities at this point have no other option but to say, bluntly, that

jobs should not be distributed according to competence. The anti-biological egalitarian must indeed sympathize with this valiant response for, from his perspective, if competence is itself already acquired with the help of morally undeserved advantages, it should definitely not be permitted to give rise to still further gains: or, to paraphrase Occam's razor, *inaequalitates non sunt multiplicandae praeter necessitatem*.

But what is an alternative to competence? Many critics argue with some force that, if they want to be consequent, egalitarians would have to advocate the allocation of jobs by some random procedure. Egalitarians themselves, with minor exceptions, turn a deaf ear to this siren call. Although it is not uncommon to hear from the defenders of affirmative action or reverse discrimination that competence should not be the sole criterion for job acquisition, it is seldom explicitly stated that selection ought here to be left to pure chance, and that the old liberal principle "*Carrière ouverte aux talents*" is thus to be replaced by the "genuinely democratic" principle "*Carrière ouverte à tous*." But it is not unheard of: to give just one example, medical students in Holland, at least until quite recently, were chosen by lottery (weighted in favor of those with the higher school marks), and it was in order to compensate for the repeated bad luck of some that even the number of times an applicant has lost out in a lottery was taken into consideration (Payer 1978).

Understandably enough, even the most radical egalitarians are not very enthusiastic about recommending such a procedure as a remedy for "natural injustice." But their situation is additionally aggravated by the fact that on two different counts we have reason to believe that the role of innate abilities in determining competence tends to increase with time. First, with the equalization of educational opportunities and other environmental influences the importance of genetic factors must relatively grow. As frequently pointed out (Jencks 1975, p. 73; Scarr 1976; Herrnstein 1973, pp. 13, 46; Young 1961, p. 115), it is a matter of pure logic that when one source of variance is made smaller the share of other factors in the total variance must, *ceteris paribus*, become larger.

The second reason has to do with statistics. As the level of achievement required to get a certain job rises, the recipients of the job will be all the more recruited from the pool of gifted individuals. To see this, consider in Figure 2 two groups of people, A and B, with, respectively, inferior and superior innate abilities (relevant for a given occupation). A built-in assumption is that the differences in achievement are normally distributed in both groups. If all other factors influencing achievement are randomly distributed and if they equally affect both groups, persons belonging to B will on average do better due to their inborn advantage. Now, we want to know what will happen when a change occurs and when the degree of achievement minimally qualifying for the job gets higher—the natural

outcome of the pressure of competition in prestigious occupations. The consequences are conspicuous in Figure 2 where the competence threshold moves to the right, first from I to II, and then from II to III.

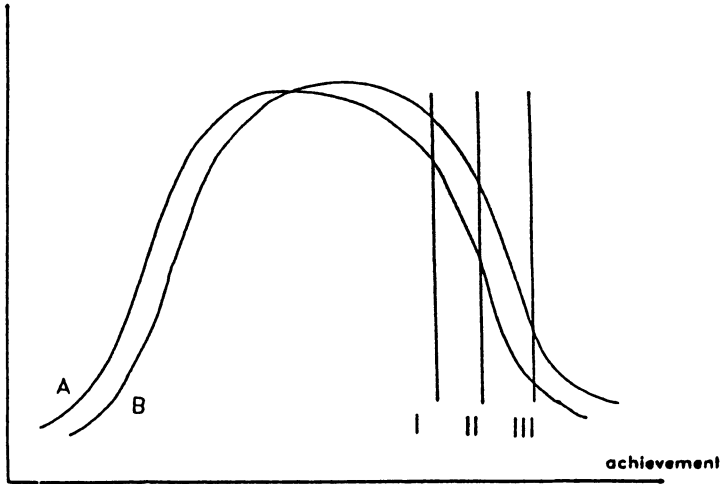


Figure 2

The more demanding acceptance criteria, the greater proportion of qualified applicants will come from group B till at last, at the limit, it might even happen that there is simply no individual in group A who qualifies for the job. It is worth mentioning that for this pattern to appear it is not necessary for the difference in the average achievement between two groups to be especially large. This shows that, contrary to a widespread opinion, a weak statistical variation between groups *can* under some conditions make a big difference and have strong, socially important effects. (This point is also made in Levin 1987, pp. 32-33.)

THE THIRD ARROW

In following the evolution of inequality, the time has now come to take up the final stage, the translation of inequality of occupation into economic inequalities (as represented by the last arrow in Figure 1). Biology casts a long shadow over this arrow, and my interest is as much in the shadow as in the arrow itself. Less metaphorically, I do not want to discuss here whether economic inequalities are morally acceptable *per se*, but only insofar as these inequalities carry the remote traces of initial biological differences. This restriction does not make our topic lose on its importance since many egalitarians (as documented on p. 4g) do not object to economic inequalities as such, but only to the ones that are due to "morally arbitrary" differences in innate abilities.

There is something rather peculiar in the position of these egalitarians. They allow initial inequalities to be reproduced without interference up to the economic domain and only then is their pulse quickened. At the same time, however, they say that what they find ethically objectionable is the source of these inequalities which belongs to a much earlier stage in the whole process. This is peculiar because one would expect that attempts to correct the moral wrong would be directed somewhere close to the place where injustice has been committed. Otherwise, the procedure might begin to look like forbidding the sale of stolen goods instead of forbidding the stealing itself.

The central problem is that the egalitarian standpoint under discussion is eminently historical. It objects to inequalities *because they derive from biological differences*. But if having superior innate abilities is a "morally arbitrary" feature, why protest only against its producing economic advantages, and not also against its generating educational and occupational inequalities? To put it differently, if the distant origins of inequalities is what makes them unacceptable, it is hard to understand why they are allowed to develop freely all along the way until at long last in the economic domain they suddenly become an abomination. I shall venture a speculation on the reasons for such a characteristic delayed reaction of anti-biological egalitarians.

I hope I have already shown that the attempts to intervene at some place earlier in the sequence have little appeal. On the one hand, meddling with biological differences directly, if possible, would conflict with personal integrity. On the other hand, trying to break the connections represented by two first arrows in Figure 1 (the connection of talent with achievement, and the connection of achievement with occupation) goes so much against the liberal-democratic grain that most egalitarians balk at the idea of supporting such measures. Although their own idea of "undeserved and unfair advantages from birth lottery" pushes them naturally toward intervening at the earliest time possible, the tendency is in these earlier phases opposed by much stronger and deeply entrenched moral principles. So, egalitarian dissatisfaction is held in check there and then given a delayed outlet in the sphere of economic inequalities.

The situation in the economic sphere is markedly different. Here, there is no readily recognizable damage from trying to disrupt the existing association between occupations and incomes. Little attention is paid to the warnings about possibly far-reaching negative side effects of economic redistribution (for a short overview, see Mead 1976, pp. 189-190). Public opinion is imbued with the view that present economic inequalities are beyond the limits of tolerance. It is hence not only that proposals for economic redistribution are not encountering obstacles: they are positively encouraged.

The fascination with the subject goes back to the antiquity. Plato sug-

gested that differences in wealth among citizens should not exceed the ratio 4:1. Aristotle disagreed: he preferred the relation of 5:1. The discussion continues to the present day, with the scene being dominated by a revolt against inequality, less reasoned out and more grounded in vague moral intuitions. It was by sensing this atmosphere that Irving Kristol, acting as editor of *Public Interest*, was motivated to approach several intellectuals who were known for their criticism of the distribution of income in the United States, and to invite them to contribute an article describing what a fair distribution of income would be like. He never received such an article and concluded that "no one seems willing to commit himself to a precise definition from which statesmen and social critics can take their bearings." (Kristol 1972, p. 41)

Rawls's Difference Principle might seem to be an exception. And it is. It provides a relatively simple and unambiguous criterion of acceptable inequalities: these are the ones by the existence of which those who are worst off also benefit. Rawls's principle does not suffer from imprecision. However, there is another problem with it. It owes much of its moral appeal to our presupposing that the worst off are *poor*. This presupposition forces itself upon us almost irresistibly because it is so clearly true in all present societies. But is it not possible that by accepting the Difference Principle we actually react not against inequality, but against poverty? Indeed, it is a standing criticism of egalitarianism (Cooper 1980, p. 79; Bauer 1983, p. 380; Letwin 1983, p. 68; Miller 1982, p. 80; Flew 1981, pp. 24-27; Frankfurt 1987, pp. 21-23) that it illegitimately draws its plausibility from such a conflation of poverty with inequality.

Thus, if those worst off were not hungry, if they had decent housing, if their children were not educationally deprived, etc., it is doubtful whether the improvement of their position would have any moral priority in our considerations. What is disturbing about the worst off is not that they have less than others in relative terms, but that their situation is so bad (absolutely) that some of their basic and urgent needs remain unsatisfied. Of course, which needs are classified as being "basic" or "urgent" depends on the general level of economic prosperity, so that in richer societies these minimal needs often include much of what is elsewhere regarded as luxury. Nevertheless, the descriptions "worst off" and "poor" are conceptually distinct, and we should try, therefore, to make clear to ourselves which of the two categories moves us, morally, to economic redistribution. When this ambiguity is brought to the fore some people, at least, might no more see anything objectionable in economic inequalities *per se*, and egalitarianism may lose for them most of its magnetism.

Even Thomas Nagel, who is more concerned with equality than Rawls, admits that his "moral instincts reveal no egalitarian priority for the well-to-do over the rich and superrich" (Nagel 1991, p. 70). Apparently, for

Nagel, too, the Difference Principle would cease to apply in a society where, after the Veil of Ignorance is lifted, the worst possible outcome for its members were to realize that, *horribile dictu*, they are not millionaires but merely well-off.

I want to suggest that we tend in a very similar way to misinterpret our own moral reaction to biological inequalities. When we feel that we are under the pull of the idea that those with inferior natural abilities should on that ground have a right to some compensation from society we take this as an argument for egalitarianism; for we *think* that we are driven in this direction by our yearning to restore the equality which is so arbitrarily disrupted by "natural lottery." But perhaps it has nothing to do with equality. We may discover, on reflection, that in pondering on this issue it simply happens that the examples most frequently thought of are serious biological handicaps, and that the manifest presence of urgent need in these cases is what actually justifies social intervention. So, again, we are misled insofar as we ascribe to the moral force of equality what is really only the result of our concern for specially difficult human situations. It may well be that when the two kinds of cases are kept distinct in our minds much fewer people will be attracted to extend egalitarian reasoning to the normal range of human biological differences.¹

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NOTES

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