

The Great Race: Equal Opportunity in a Land of Inequality

As the daughter of a proud Libertarian, I read my first Ayn Rand novel at the age of ten. At fourteen I finished her grand manifesto, *Atlas Shrugged*, and by seventeen I was convinced that I would be a life-long disciple, with the staunch belief that no man is his brother's keeper. "Altruism" had become something of a dirty word in my mind, state welfare was something that encouraged laziness, and any attempts at redistribution of wealth were an absolute evil, a base attempt to mooch off of those who had worked hard for their wealth.

Needless to say, when I tell people that I'm now a volunteer for the Bernie Sanders campaign it's a bit of a shock for those who knew me during my "Randian" phase. What could have caused such cognitive dissonance? Was I hit on the head, or perhaps bitten by something radioactive? The most likely external factor was the time I spent in Germany as an exchange student, where I discovered that it was possible to have both a highly functioning market economy and social services that enabled all citizens to live with dignity. But my ideological transformation was largely internal, a gradual questioning of the principles of Randian thought and growing uneasiness with what it implied about the justness of vast inequality.

The critical debate for me became about whether or not hard work and brilliance (or lack thereof) was really the cause of wealth or poverty. The heroes and heroines of Ayn Rand's novels attained their wealth through constant struggle, brilliance, and the willingness to take risks on ideas that were deviant from the norm. Those that lacked their drive or prowess and yet wanted to share in the spoils were vilified, as the poor often are today, as "leeches", with an arrogant sense of entitlement to that which they hadn't earned. I began to notice the same rhetoric in political debates with conservative friends— that the poor are poor because they aren't working hard enough or simply lack the necessary intelligence or skill, and that the rich are rich because they worked the hardest and might have gotten

lucky along the way. The few rags-to-riches stories served as proof that with enough hard work, anyone could reach the top, thus high levels of income inequality are just and efforts to redistribute wealth unjust. Central to this logic seemed the assumption of equal opportunity— the idea that anyone really does have a shot at winning the race. It seemed absurd to argue for complete equality of outcomes— after all there are certainly natural differences between individuals like intelligence, ability and disposition that lead to natural inequalities—but as long as the opportunity for social mobility is relatively equal, individuals should be free to pursue their interests as they see fit without undue intervention from the state.

This suggests that there are different kinds of inequality— as Milton Friedman once put it: “one kind of inequality is a sign of dynamic change, social mobility, equality of opportunity; the other, of a status society”. That is, that inequality is unjust when it is persistent across generations and there is no hope for advancement—when it is *static*. People are not free to pursue wealth and status if that is what they desire, and freedom (according to most Libertarian thinkers) is the most important means of judging a society. But when inequality is *dynamic*, when every man and woman has an equal shot at financial success, inequality is less problematic. The debate then becomes not whether inequality is just or unjust, but what *kinds* of inequalities are just and unjust.

Friedman hints that it is only static inequality which should concern us, that as long as equal opportunity for economic advancement exists, regardless of one’s circumstances at birth, then economic outcomes are fair, and redistribution is not justified.

But just what do we mean by equal opportunity? It is a fairly non-controversial idea until one begins to dissect what it is and how to achieve it. That is the focus of this essay and an issue

which I believe is at the heart of the disagreement between liberals and conservatives about income inequality and redistribution of wealth.

To illustrate this dilemma, let us imagine a 500 meter race between two opponents, in which the faster runner will receive a \$500 prize. The first runner's course is a freshly paved trail, free of obstacles, and with a slight tail wind. The second runner's course is over rough terrain, with logs, boulders, and wide ditches to be traversed. There is a headwind, and the runner must carry a heavy pack. In these circumstances, it is likely that the first runner will achieve the faster time and win the prize. It would not be impossible for the second runner to win, but he faces significant disadvantages. Despite the fact that each runner theoretically has a chance at winning, it would seem apparent that this is an unfair race. If the first runner were to win, the prize money would not seem justly distributed because of the clear advantages that the runner had.

So what would a more equal race look like? It might seem simple—allow the two runners to compete on the same kind of terrain, and remove the heavy pack from the second runner's shoulders. The different wind patterns are unfortunate, but not necessarily unjust since they are natural occurrences. (After all, the outcomes of football games played in the snow still count towards national records just as games in good weather.) In the context of equal chances, the winner of the race will be determined by merit, (who trained the longest and who ran the hardest) natural ability, (whose body is most naturally suited for running) and a little bit of luck (headwind or tailwind). One runner might also have access to better training facilities, trainers, etc. but we do not consider this an unjust advantage (consider Olympic

training programs). Given these circumstances, the race seems fair, and thus whoever wins is justly awarded the prize money. The loser has little reason to complain or cry foul.

The notion of a “fair race” is in reality much more complicated. Consider the removal of external obstacles: not logs and boulders but poverty and structural racism, or the removal of physical disadvantages: not a heavy pack but obesity, illiteracy, and teenage pregnancy. The question is not whether these circumstances are a disadvantage (they clearly are), rather whose responsibility it is to remove or overcome them. Is it the individual’s responsibility, through hard work and self-control? Or does the government have the power or obligation to redistribute winnings from race winners to remove obstacles? If the government plays a role, which inequalities are fair and natural and which are unjust? On what grounds (if any) is redistribution justified for the sake of removing unjust obstacles?

To better understand this question it is useful to explore two concepts: the clash between positive and negative freedoms, and the concept of structural harm. Negative freedoms are considered freedom *from* external constraints—freedom from physical harm, unwarranted arrest, discrimination, theft and oppression on the basis of speech or religion, for example. It is easiest to justify government protection for these kinds of freedom, and most people agree that this is an appropriate use of government power. In our metaphor, negative freedom is the freedom to run in the race. Being physically prevented from doing so would be an act of coercion and a clear violation of equal opportunity. A headwind might also be considered a violation of negative freedom as an actively oppressive force, though it is harder to prevent, since it is a natural occurrence.

Positive freedom is a bit trickier. If we can think of negative freedom as forces which coercively hold one back, we can think of positive freedoms as forces which actively propel one forward. Examples of positive freedom include the freedom to be healthy, to sleep inside, to be educated, to realize one's potential, and to feel fulfilled. In our metaphor a tailwind would be considered a positive freedom, as would extra training resources to build one's capacities.

The question is, if violations of negative freedoms are forces which actively hold one back, and provisions for positive freedoms are forces which actively propel one forward, what of the obstacles that neither actively oppress nor actively propel? What of the boulders lying innocuously in one's path, placed there by no one and not a force of active coercion, yet clearly an obstacle to success? For argument's sake let's call these kinds of obstacles "neutral freedoms" or "neutral harms." One might also think of them as "coercion lite"—a passive source of resistance that makes success more difficult, while not a form of active oppression.

It is this grey zone which makes up most of the debate about government power to redistribute wealth for social means. Our notions of "rights" are generally derived from these conceptions of freedoms, and what one considers a right depends on what one considers a valid freedom. Most people agree that we have the right to not be shot or robbed. More contentious is the idea that we have a right to health care, or food, or basic income. It is doubtful that Americans will ever agree (as many Scandinavian countries have) that the government has the right and obligation to provide for positive rights, thus the compromise must lie somewhere in the middle. It lies in deciding which obstacles must be removed in order to call it a fair race.

Illiteracy won't kill you (at least not directly), but as a society we have agreed that basic education should be a right to all. Heart disease *will* kill you, but in America we have not yet declared health care as a right. So where do we draw the line? The U.S. Declaration of Independence does not guarantee the right to happiness, rather the *pursuit* of it. We are not guaranteed to win the race, but we are guaranteed the chance to run in it, and with some assumption of equal opportunity. But what does that *mean*? Sometimes that means removing innocuous boulders, or at least helping provide the capabilities needed to overcome them (e.g. education). But which boulders qualify as worthy of removal, that is to say, *what kinds of inequalities of circumstance and capability are unjust*? Is removing these obstacles a matter of personal responsibility or can the government justly intervene? I believe the debate comes down to the complex relationship between three forces: luck, hard work, and structural advantage (or as I like to put it: luck, not luck, and perpetual luck).

To understand these dynamics I find it useful to ask the following question: What do Bill Gates, The Beatles, and the Canadian National Hockey Team all have in common? This is explored by Malcom Gladwell in his book "Outliers," in which he explores great stories of success particularly as they relate to the legend (or myth) of the self-made man. The point, he argues, is that too often we rely on the notion of hard work to explain success, when in reality there is usually a good deal of luck and structural advantage that play into the story.

In the mid-1980s, a team of psychologists noticed something odd about the roster of the Canadian National Hockey team: A significantly disproportionate number of the players were born in the months of January, February and March. Looking at other hockey leagues, the same statistics held true. The explanation is simple, writes Gladwell:

“It has nothing to do with astrology, not is there anything magical about the first three months of the year. It’s simply that in Canada the eligibility cutoff for age-class hockey is January 1st. A boy who turns ten on January 2nd, then, could be playing alongside someone who doesn’t turn ten until the end of the year—and at that age, in preadolescence, a twelve-month gap in age represents an enormous difference in physical maturity.”

Hard work was certainly still a factor, but there are subtle statistical advantages like this one that often go unnoticed. An advantage like this is not considered unjust because it could theoretically happen to anyone. One is equally as likely to be born in January as December no matter what socio-economic class one’s parents belong to.

There is another kind of luck that might be more problematic: luck that *does* depend on who your parents are, or what neighborhood you grow up in, and is a luck that you are likely to pass on to your own children. This idea of *perpetual* or *structural* luck, luck that repeats itself generation after generation, is more problematic because of the structural advantages and disadvantages it causes. The most obvious of these structural advantages is the advantages passed on by affluent parents to their children.

The story of Bill Gates is often told as one of unappalled brilliance and ambition. What are not often recounted are the dozens of lucky strikes and advantages that he encountered along the way. For example, he was the child of a wealthy lawyer and banker’s daughter, who was sent to a private school where the Mothers’ Club decided to spend the proceeds from their annual rummage sale to set up a computer club at the school with a time-sharing terminal with a direct link to a mainframe computer in downtown Seattle. This was an incredibly unique opportunity at that time. Most *colleges* didn’t have computer terminals, and yet Bill Gates had the opportunity to do real-time programming as an eighth grader in 1968. A series of lucky

breaks and connections later, Bill Gates had racked up over 10,000 hours of programming time in a seven year period, which Gladwell identifies as the magic number to becoming a master at anything. (The Beatles racked up their 10,000 hours playing 8 hours a day, 7 days a week in strip clubs in Hamburg at the recommendation of a random friend who had a connection.) To be certain, Bill Gates both worked incredibly hard and was undoubtedly very intelligent. A series of lucky breaks and structural advantages were also factors in his success.

Another question worth asking is to what extent hard work is a genetic trait, a conditioned trait, or a choice. The answer is all three, but findings from psychology reveal that it might be more conditioned than many believe. The key lies in something psychologists call “executive functioning,” which is the set of higher-order mental abilities responsible for cognitive impulse control, in other words the ability to delay gratification and exercise self-restraint. In his book “How Children Succeed,” Paul Tough examines a number of studies that show a direct correlation between traumatic experiences during early childhood (physical and sexual abuse, neglect, parental dysfunction, gang violence, etc.) and executive functioning. Considering that these traumatic experiences are more likely to occur in low-income households, this implies that *growing up in poverty literally has the capacity to change one’s brain structure.*

“The part of the brain most affected by early stress is the prefrontal cortex, which is critical in self-regulatory activities of all kinds, both emotional and cognitive. As a result, children who grow up in stressful environments generally find it harder to concentrate, harder to sit still, harder to rebound from disappointments and harder to follow directions. And that has a direct effect on their performance in school.”

If the lines between luck, hard work and structural advantage weren't blurred already, they sure are now. The effect of trauma on executive functioning should not excuse poor kids from having to work hard, but it complicates the debate about personal responsibility, for to say that it is solely a matter of hard work to overcome poverty and its ills—obesity, teenage pregnancy, gang affiliation, drug abuse—is to ignore the very real roles that bad luck and structural disadvantage have played in the situation.

If the notion of hard work is not enough to explain success, we must return to the idea of luck and structural advantage. Unfortunately, the line between structural disadvantage and bad luck are in reality much more blurred than in the neatness of a metaphor.

This raises a difficult dilemma when it comes to redistribution. If we can't easily determine which advantages are a matter of luck and which are structural, why do the winners of the metaphoric race have an obligation to pay (via taxes) for the removal of obstacles for other "runners," especially if they haven't done anything wrong?

One of the most famous lines from *Atlas Shrugged* is "I swear by my life and my love of it that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine." I, along with most followers of Ayn Rand, do not believe that men have an *inherent* moral obligation to help one another. Philanthropists and altruists would generally disagree, which is why their impassioned pleas for brotherhood and moral duty to help our fellow man fall on many a deaf ear when the time comes to raise taxes. The point of compromise must begin with a premise that is widely accepted— that whether or not we have a duty to help, we certainly have a duty not to *harm*.

But the concept of harm is perhaps just as complicated as that of “natural inequality” when we look at it systemically. There are two kinds of harm: direct harm and structural harm (sometimes referred to as structural violence). Direct harm is that with which we are most familiar— person-to-person physical deprivation of safety or negative rights. Structural harm, like neutral freedom, is less obvious. It is the boulder in the path that seems to just exist, by no fault of anyone else. In real life structural harms are those that are systemic—created by the collective action of thousands, and with impacts that are harmful but in indirect, often invisible ways.

Consider for example, the decision of an affluent family to move out of a particular neighborhood because the quality of the schools is not to their standards. It seems like a perfectly reasonable rational decision, and in fact it is. But what happens when *all* of the affluent families gradually move out of the neighborhood, for the same or similar reason? Property values go down, and with them tax revenue for the school system. The quality of the schools declines even more, and perhaps certain after school tutoring and college preparatory programs are cut due to lack of funding. The absence of those programs make it less likely that students at that school will graduate from high school or go to college, which will impact their later prospects in life. But the disadvantage those students now face was not a direct result of one family’s decision to move away. *That’s just life*, many will say. It’s not *my* fault. And that’s the thing. It *is* just life. It *isn’t* any one person’s fault. But if no one is directly responsible for a problem, then who bears responsibility for the solution? No one? Or *everyone*?

The question we need to ask is *who benefits from the problem*? When a tsunami decimates Southeast Asia, it isn’t anyone’s fault, and no one really benefits from the misfortune

of Southeast Asians. Therefore one could argue that donating money to the Red Cross to assist with relief efforts is a good thing to do, but isn't necessarily a moral obligation. On the other hand, when we benefit from buying cheap clothing because American garment factories closed shop to move production to countries where they can legally pay workers \$50 per month, putting those American workers out of a job, we are indirectly and collectively responsible for the unemployment of those American workers. Structural harm is all around us, and we benefit from it in ways that we cannot even begin to be aware of. If we cannot extricate ourselves from a system that is structurally harmful to some among us, *there arises a moral obligation to collectively address structural injustice*. That is, if we benefit, however indirectly, from the structural disadvantage of others, *we lose the right to remain morally neutral*.

This then serves as a basis for navigating that gray zone of neutral or structural harms. If we accept that the government has the authority to protect against violations of negative freedoms AND to redistribute wealth for the sake of equal opportunity, *redistribution should occur only to the extent that it is necessary to remove structural disadvantages*. When considering provisions that fall in the gray zone the useful question is not "is this good, service or capability a right" but *does the lack of this thing pose a structural disadvantage in such a way that it impedes social mobility*. Only in a society where structural disadvantage is adequately addressed can inequality be justified, for it dynamic and exists in the context of genuine opportunity for economic mobility based on merit. This metric is an attempt to find a compromise between the guarantee of positive and negative rights, a division which explains a great number of contemporary disagreements about the role of government.

The final point I want to make is one regarding rhetoric. There is a pattern whereby the poor are described as lazy, irresponsible, or unintelligent and that the rich are greedy or corrupt. Each position denigrates and vilifies an entire class, failing to recognize the structural barriers to success that exist for the poor and suggesting that the wealthy are to blame for their advantages, or that they somehow cheated in the race just because they had a clear path. Certainly there are lazy poor and greedy rich, but in general it has been my observation that most people are just trying to get by with what they've got and make themselves happy.

A more insightful observation might be that in general the rich are rich because they worked hard and were lucky, and the poor are poor because they worked hard and were unlucky. For redistribution to occur with minimal perception of coercion, (all taxes must be seen as coercive, since you can be sent to jail for not paying them) it does not bode well to vilify those from whom you are collecting taxes. It would be far better to make the wealthy out to be heroes for their sportsmanship and willingness to even out the playing field. It is merely a shift of psychology, but changing the rhetoric on both sides of the aisle would make for smoother relations between the socioeconomic classes and encourage a greater sense of common understanding.

Another general rule of thumb is to start from premises that are commonly accepted. In the debate about inequality I believe we must begin with two premises: that equal opportunity is a good thing, and that we have a moral obligation to do no harm. These are premises that Ayn Rand probably would have agreed with, which is why my ideological evolution is not one of cognitive dissonance, but compromise based on a set of commonly accepted principles. If we want to find compromise and combat gridlock, or better yet convince others of our beliefs, we

have to start from common ground. It is unlikely that I will ever convince my dad to vote for Bernie Sanders, but by explaining concepts of structural advantage and harm without contradicting his basic beliefs, we come closer to a point of understanding. In this way we might tackle inequality from a place of compromise and agreement, one innocuous boulder at a time.

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