

Welfare \neq Justice for the Disadvantaged

A pressing issue for egalitarians in regards to answering the “equality of what?” question and establishing a substantive criterion of equality that is part of a theory of justice and: treats like cases alike; gives everyone full and equal consideration; and aims to equalize something of value, is that of disability, which we shall regard as being a significant personal or social limitation associated with a physical or mental impairment or dysfunction (Arneson). Precisely, many egalitarians have struggled to derive a viable metric that can successfully eliminate the injustices and inequalities that arise from disability or involuntary disadvantages that arise through no choice or fault of one's own. Both welfare and resource egalitarianism, being forms of distributive justice, aim to solve this problem and propose different means to do so that are central to their idea of what we should make equal. While welfarism concerns itself with placing people's preferences at the center of what individuals should receive from egalitarian justice, resourcism focuses on the bigger picture of egalitarian justice and an all-purpose means of achieving the right distribution (resources). I shall argue that resource egalitarianism more effectively addresses disability in an effort to promote justice as the inequalities that arise from such cases are not themselves a product of unequal levels of welfare, but rather unequal shares of resources. Precisely, Ronald Dworkin's theory of equality of resources offers a more appealing solution to the problem of redistribution to the disabled through his idea of promoting fair and equal bundles of resources, distinction between “option luck” and “brute luck”, and way of measuring equality via an “envy test”. Furthermore, I shall argue that welfarism, despite promoting equal welfare, is not a sufficient metric for promoting justice. In this essay, I shall outline welfarist and resourcist responses to disability and provide reasons to support my claim that Dworkin's theory of resource egalitarianism poses a more compelling solution to the problem surrounding disability, and moreover, that welfare egalitarianism does not ensure social justice.

As mentioned previously, welfare egalitarianism (or welfarism) places people's preferences at the forefront of what they are owed from egalitarian justice. Precisely, this theory focuses on promoting equal welfare, which we shall consider as being some aspect of a person's conscious life, such as a feeling of happiness, and a matter of personal success (in filling a person's preferences, goals, tastes, or ambitions). As a metric, subjective and objective theories of welfarism value welfare as an intrinsic good and aim to account for instances of involuntary misfortune that arise from disability by meeting the demands of what will make them most satisfied, happy or “well-off”, regardless of how this may be achieved. Under this light, citizens that are handicapped or disabled are seen as “worse-off” than able-bodied citizens because their circumstances result in lower levels of welfare. How welfarism would aim to solve such a problem is by redistributing resources that promote welfare so as to benefit the “worse off”. In

such cases where someone's disability is the source of their dissatisfaction or lack of welfare, this theory is successful in promoting the appropriate kind of equality. However, it is important to note that people have vastly different ideas of what it means to be "well-off" and live a good life. Take for example, a person who cannot walk and is less happy than one who can but not because of their disability. A welfare egalitarian would prioritize the welfare of the disadvantaged citizen and provide them with numerous resources to ensure that they are as "well-off" as the able-bodied citizen or even slightly more "well-off" than they were, even at the cost of the welfare of many other "better off" individuals (because in this view, means does not matter). Moreover, suppose that these two citizens have reached an equal level of welfare that is independent from compensating for any disability. That is, suppose that the disabled citizen is content despite his inability to move freely. In such a case, a welfare egalitarian would argue that both citizens are equal and that there is no longer a need to provide the disabled citizen with any kind of aid or compensation as justice has been ensured. Yet, it seems that there are still inequalities not being acknowledged that stretch beyond a matter of welfare.

While welfarism is solely focused on equalizing and maximizing the intrinsic good we regard as welfare, resourcism is concerned with distributing valuable instrumental goods we call resources to individuals as a way to promote justice. Resources, or goods (both tangible and intangible) that one can utilize to benefit from, are believed to be the most appropriate answer to the "equality of what?" question and are viewed as particularly valuable to resource egalitarians because in addition to being able to generate welfare, they can be used to guarantee that people are able to function and thrive in a society, and pursue their individual conception of a good life. Many resourcists including Dworkin claim that inequalities that arise from disability do not result from a lack of welfare, but rather a lack of resources. That is, from the example mentioned previously, the citizen who is unable to walk has less bodily resources than someone who is able-bodied. Therefore, to promote the kind of equality recourse egalitarianism is after in such a case, Dworkin would argue that shares or "bundles" of resources should be equalized so that the handicapped individual would receive the same bundle as the able-bodied citizen plus say, a wheelchair. This way, both individuals would now have an equal bundle of resources and thus equal opportunity (Long). Dworkin's measure of equality through the envy test would prove that both citizens are now equal because having been given the appropriate bundles to ensure they have equal resources, there is no reason for one to envy the life of the other. Moreover, in acknowledging Dworkin's distinction between advantages/disadvantages that one acquires as a result of their actions ("option luck"); and advantages/disadvantages that one acquires through no fault/choice of their own ("brute luck"), which he believes to be the only circumstances deserving of compensation, it is clear that the disabled individual is owed compensation for his/her undeserved circumstance, and further, that if any other advantage/disadvantage were to arise from a life choice, that the "worse-off" individual would still have no reason to envy the life of the other as they were both given the same opportunity (Dworkin). Notice that shifting the focus from promoting equal welfare to promoting equal resources still promotes welfare in cases

where this is all that matters to some to have a good life, but more importantly, it promotes equal opportunity when this is not the case.

It is clear that to appropriately accommodate for the injustices of disability, we must take into account more than just welfare. Indeed, one's happiness and well-being may include the ability to walk for instance (mobility), but as shown, this isn't always the case. Many disabled citizens may be content despite their state, but if equality of welfare is all that we are after, then we should be okay with other inequalities that arise from disability. However, the goal of deriving a criterion of equality is to promote justice within a society which cannot be achieved if there are inequalities present even after equalizing welfare. The inequalities that arise from a society with disabled individuals are not limited to welfare, but rather they include the ability to function and thrive as equal members of society, which is compromised when putting welfare at the forefront of what we should be making equal. For this reason, a society that has succeeded in equalizing welfare for all of its citizens does not guarantee that it is a just society. Where maladaptive preferences and lack of self-respect are also possible, equal welfare does not suffice in ensuring justice and fairness. Take for instance, a society where disabled citizens have developed a sense of inferiority and lack self-respect; have conditioned themselves to believe they are deserving of their circumstances; and have found a way to be happy in spite of their circumstances, meanwhile other members of society may only be satisfied with bountiful resources and opportunities. Despite being a society in which citizens have equal levels of welfare, it is not one that has justice, fairness, or equal opportunity because the disabled individuals are unaware of the opportunities they could have. Thus, the concerning inequalities that arise from disability (such as opportunity) result not from unequal levels of welfare, but rather unequal resources. According to Dworkin, while able-bodied individuals possess resources to move freely, others do not, and society has an obligation to compensate for their luck-derived circumstances to ensure that all citizens are given equal opportunity to live a good life such that no one citizen would prefer someone else's life over their own. Therefore, a metric of equality that focuses on providing equal resources is better suited to address and alleviate the concerns of disability, and promote justice within a society.

References:

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