Individual Responsibility & Egalitarian Justice

Faith Armitage
f.t.armitage@lse.ac.uk


In a recent article, Richard Arneson (2000a: 345) compares two conflicting accounts of equality: luck egalitarianism and democratic egalitarianism. He is taking up an earlier article by Elizabeth Anderson (1999), who coined the term “luck egalitarianism” for a set of theories of equality including those articulated by Arneson, Ronald Dworkin, and G.A. Cohen. Arneson and Anderson disagree about which is the more plausible and attractive account, with Arneson preferring luck equality, and in particular, a version of it he calls ‘responsibility-catering prioritarianism’ (RCP for short) and Anderson preferring democratic equality. At one point in his analysis, Arneson lays out one reason why we should prefer luck equality with this scenario:

Suppose that a national park service rescue team can choose just one of three lifesaving missions. Each involves significant risk of severe harm to rescue workers but promises a significant net savings of lives. Suppose these risks and benefits are the same for each of the three rival missions. The park rescue team must choose either to assist (a) a party of stranded schoolchildren caught in an unanticipated blizzard while on a school outing, (b) a party of experienced climbers who carefully chose to pursue a difficult route under hazardous conditions which then suddenly turned desperate, or (c) a party of tourists who ignored warning signs and the stern advice of park rangers to venture on a foolhardy hike across a treacherous steep slope, rendered more treacherous by their mid-hike alcohol consumption (348).

If one correctly weighs choice and responsibility, according to Arneson, the right answer is: rescue the busload of children. “I take it to be a datum in this case,” he writes, “that the fully voluntary choice of the climbers to shoulder the risk they take and the grossly reckless conduct of the hikers reduce their moral claims to be aided by comparison with the claim of the stranded schoolchildren” (Arneson 2000a).

“Luck egalitarianism” is new shorthand for a particular variety of liberal egalitarianism. In this paper, I focus on one particular aspect of it: what Arneson has aptly called its ‘responsibility-catering’ element.

Arneson’s scenario vividly illustrates what has become a central project for luck egalitarians: making individuals’ outcomes in life reflect just precisely what they have chosen in life and not what has arbitrarily befallen them. Arneson is especially frank

1 Thanks to Anne Phillips, Jonathan Quong and Kathy King for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.
about this; I have not seen anyone else use the term ‘cater’ to describe the relationship between individual responsibility and social justice. The exchange between Arneson and Anderson represents an occasion for entering into the debate about the role of notions of individual responsibility in theories of distributive justice.

Section one briefly describes luck egalitarianism, with particular attention to the role of choice and individual responsibility. Section two considers objections to responsibility-catering as the central motivation or heart of egalitarian theory. Now, what is the effect of these criticisms? What are the prospects for articulating a non-responsibility-catering egalitarianism? Section three, which discusses the doctrine of sufficiency, provides an intermediate step. Section four focuses on Elizabeth Anderson’s version of that doctrine. Against Arneson’s reductive view that Anderson’s egalitarian ideal is just a form of sufficiency, I show how she locates sufficiency within a more complex approach to egalitarian justice. Section five concludes by asking how Anderson’s view has been criticised. I suggest that because her approach says that egalitarianism concerns social equality as well as economic, it has resources to deal with objections levelled at sufficiency, and at the same time, it avoids the objections levelled against responsibility-catering equality.

1. Responsibility-Catering Egalitarianism

As many commentators have noted, responsibility-catering egalitarians share a general ethic, despite disagreement about the correct currency of equality. The general ethic says that we should compensate individuals for disadvantages traceable to bad luck, but we do not have to compensate individuals for disadvantages traceable to voluntary choices whose results could reasonably have been predicted. As Arneson explains, “In the ideal luck egalitarian society, there are no inequalities in people’s life prospects except those that arise through processes of voluntary choice or faulty conduct, for which the agents involved can reasonably be held responsible” (Arneson 2000a: 339). This rule does not preclude a society having a charitable system in place to rescue stupid or reckless individuals whose bad choices have led to hard times (Cf. Mason 2000: 229). The point is, justice does not require it.

Again, as many commentators have observed, responsibility-catering equality arises from sensitive observations about human differences and reasons for responding to those differences differently. On one hand, it seems right that we respond to unchosen differences that have bad effects on an individual’s condition. On the other hand, it seems perverse that we respond, in the name of equality, to wilfully chosen differences even if they do have bad effects on the individual’s condition because that would require treating others unequally by seizing some of their resources.

Arneson first developed his model under the label ‘equality of opportunity for welfare’ (Arneson 1989). More recently, he has re-cast it as ‘responsibility-catering prioritarianism’ (Arneson 2000a; 2002: 173-75, 2000b). G.A. Cohen refers to his similar model as ‘equality of access to advantage’ (Cohen 1989). The syntactic structure of

---

2 Catriona Mackinnon, a critic, calls it ‘responsibility-oriented’ egalitarianism (McKinnon 2003: 145).
those terms (equality of opportunity for welfare; equality of access to advantage) illuminates how they cater to responsibility. Both theorists argue that individuals should be made equal in terms of their opportunity or chances to enjoy welfare, not that they should somehow be forced to actually have identical welfare levels. So the element of choice or responsibility for outcomes is inserted.

According to John Roemer (1993: 147), Ronald Dworkin, G.A. Cohen and Richard Arneson have most “actively addressed” the issue of individual responsibility. Dworkin’s version promotes equality of resources, while Cohen and Arneson prefer equality of welfare. In these theorists’ exchanges over the years, characters such as Tiny Tim, the deprived but happy cripple, and Louis, the man with a taste for champagne, are landmarks.

From Dworkin’s point of view, equality of welfare is unacceptable for two main reasons. First, equality of welfare is unmoved by the problem of adaptive preferences, exemplified by Tiny Tim. Tiny Tim makes no claim for extra resources because his welfare is high. But this should make us uneasy since he clearly does not possess his fair share of society’s resources. Second, equality of welfare is wrongly moved by situations of expensive tastes. Louis has cultivated a taste for champagne which, left unsatisfied, lowers his welfare. When he appeals to us for extra resources in order to satisfy his tastes, we should be uneasy because he will therefore claim more than his fair share.

From the equality of welfare point of view, equality of resources is unacceptable for two main reasons. First, it substitutes (what should be) our ultimate and appropriate concern for people’s welfare with an obsession about their resources. This is apparent, for example, in our concern for the fuel poverty suffered by pensioners and poor folk during UK winters. This is G.A. Cohen’s example, which follows on what he admits is a “medically fanciful” one about a man with paradoxically robust but painful arms (1989: 919-20). Cohen writes: “A would-be resource egalitarian who said, ‘Compensation is in order here because the man lacks the resource of being able to avoid pain’ [or being able to avoid chills] would be invoking the idea of equality of opportunity for welfare even if he would be using resourcist language to explain it” (919). Resource “fetishism” masks the fact that we really care about people’s discomfort itself (Cohen 1989; Sen 1980: 368).

Second, equality of resources’ non-compensation rules are too clumsy when it comes to the problem of expensive tastes. Equality of welfare agrees with equality of resources that Louis’s deliberately cultivated taste for champagne should not be compensated because it agrees that Louis is responsible for his condition. But what about Louis II, whose expensive taste either crept up on him unbidden, or became expensive through no fault of his own? On the strength of these sorts of examples (examined in section 2), equality of welfare says it should not matter if a disadvantage is of a welfarist or resourcist kind. Rather, as Cohen insists, what we should ask is whether an individual could have done or could now do anything about his disadvantage: “Whatever number of dimensions the space of disadvantage may have, egalitarianism, on my reading, cuts though each of its dimensions, judging certain inequalities of advantage as acceptable and others as not, its touchstone being a set of questions about the responsibility or lack of it of the disadvantaged agent” (921).
In response to these arguments, Dworkin has clarified his position. (I follow Matt Matravers’s analysis here (Matravers 2002). See his painstaking discussion for full treatment of the few points I summarise here). Dworkin allows that, sometimes, tastes and ambitions are akin to resources in that sometimes, people can no more be said to choose them than they can be said to choose their resources. However, he insists, we can justify ruling out compensation for some expensive tastes. If an individual identifies with her taste and would prefer not to be rid of it, then we should hold her consequentially responsible for it – even if she did not actively choose it – by requiring her to bear the costs of it. On the other hand, if she would prefer to be rid of her expensive taste, viewing it as akin to an unchosen handicap, then Dworkin concedes that she should not be held responsible for it. In Dworkin’s view, this refinement gains strength from the fact that is consistent with ordinary people’s morality.3

It is true that for Cohen, Dworkin and Arneson, the content of the category of redistribution-generating disadvantages is different. But it is also true that all envision two more or less clear categories: on one hand, ‘involuntary, redistribution-generating disadvantages,’ and on the other, ‘chosen, non-compensable disadvantages.’

Before we leave this section, I’d better reconnect these debates to the notion of equality of opportunity. The description advertising this workshop asserts that we can view luck egalitarianism as a “radical” version of the opportunity equality ideal. This version supposes that “justice is nothing more or less than equalizing individuals’ opportunities to lead a valuable life.” That sounds very nice and I accept that this is truly the aim of responsibility-catering egalitarianism. As Anne Phillips points out, luck egalitarians have “ratcheted up” the meaning of ‘equality of opportunity’ (2004: 2), taking it far away from a minimal ideal which merely prohibits overt discrimination. But in the process of refining their views, ‘equal opportunity to lead a valuable life’ gets transformed – for example in Dworkin’s theory – to the “opportunity to insure or provide against bad luck before it has occurred” (Dworkin 2003: 191). That is not such a sparkling ideal, and it seems possible that the responsibility-catering element contributes to taking the shine off the radical aim suggested above.

2. Objections to responsibility-catering egalitarianism

Are we going in the right direction as egalitarians insofar as we approach having a theory that caters to individual responsibility? According to critics, the more we strive to get a theory of equality whose “touchstone” (Cohen 1989: 921) is individual responsibility, the more so-called egalitarianism comes to resemble Thatcherism (Wolff 1998: 112) or the Poor Laws regime of 19th century England (Anderson 1999: 311).4

3 Cohen, Matravers, Andrew Mason and Andrew Williams all believe that this move by Dworkin is unsatisfactory for various reasons. I review their arguments in section 2.
4 Wolff: “…egalitarians, like conservatives, now favor highly conditional welfare benefits. But in the real world this does not give us egalitarianism. Rather it gives us Thatcherism, in which the poor are singled out for insulting levels of scrutiny” (Wolff 1998: 112). “Poor Law thinking pervades the reasoning of luck egalitarians,” writes Anderson. “This is most evident in their distinction between the deserving and the undeserving disadvantaged – between those who are not responsible for their misfortune and those who are.
Catriona McKinnon observes that this type of liberal egalitarian thinking says that “to be committed to equality is to be committed to assessing the extent to which the disadvantaged among us are responsible for their own suffering” (2003: 144). Put this way, the ideal is bleak. In this section, I raise doubts about the central role responsibility-catering has assumed in the tradition of liberal equality, starting with objections to Dworkin’s equality of resources.

I. Several theorists have argued that Dworkin’s equality of resources theory is bad because it is unmoved by the problem of unchosen expensive tastes. As mentioned above, Cohen shows this through Louis II, whose expensive taste for champagne simply creeps up on him, and is not deliberately cultivated. “Dworkin says: sorry, Louis, we egalitarians do not finance expensive tastes; whereas I say: sorry, Louis, we egalitarians do not finance expensive tastes which people choose to develop” (Cohen 1989: 923). If tastes and ambitions sneak up on people and are not cultivated, then Cohen supposes that they should belong to the category of ‘involuntary, redistribution-generating disadvantages.’

A related critique says that Dworkin’s theory is bad because it is unmoved by the problem of ambitions and tastes that are, or become, expensive because of social contingencies. Imagine Hollywood releases in America a movie with a subplot that celebrates pinot noir, a subtle, sophisticated wine, and disdains its vulgar cousin, merlot. The movie turns out to be a big hit, and suddenly, everyone stops buying merlot and switches to pinot noir. Imagine you are the owner of a vineyard producing only merlot grapes. Suddenly, you are in the red, through no fault of your own, but just because everyone’s preferences have changed.

Alcohol-related inequalities are popular in responsibility-catering equality literature, though this example is from real life. From the literature, here is David Miller’s case: “We have already said [with Dworkin] that, given my bundle of goods, if I choose to cultivate a taste for champagne and so have less welfare overall, that is my responsibility. But the problem now is one of a general shift from, say, beer-drinking to wine-drinking, which will enhance the value of all bundles of goods containing hop-plantations. It will be difficult for an egalitarian to agree that I should lose out because of changes in other people’s tastes (supposing I own a hop-plantation)” (Miller 1990: 89, emphasis in original).

Like the Poor Law regime, it abandons those disadvantaged through their own choices to their miserable fates, and defines the deserving disadvantaged in terms of their innate inferiority of talent, intelligence, ability, or social appeal” (1999: 311).

5 John Harlow, “Oscar winner knocks sales of merlot wine sideways,” The Sunday Times, March 6, 2005, page 22. The hit movie is Sideways. In the western US, merlot sales have dipped 2% while pinot noir sales have risen throughout the country by 16%.

6 Similarly, Matt Matravers, following Cohen, notes that Louis “does not control the tastes and choices of others, nor does he control the weather, soil types, or the growing characteristics of grapes. In short, even it were the case that Louis was responsible for his tastes, he would not be responsible for their being expensive” (Matravers 2002: 559-60).
Alcohol examples might strain our sympathy. Do we really care if Louis is badly off because of his unbidden, unquenched thirst for champagne? But the worry behind this critique is a serious one. Although we make choices, we do not choose the cost of our choices. So while it seems right to hold you responsible for your choices, we might be uneasy about holding you responsible for the costs of your choices. Fortunately, alcohol examples are not the only ones that can be used to press the point.

II. Andrew Williams mounts an argument against Dworkin’s view that also suggests it is bad because it fails to condemn interpersonal inequalities that spring from the choices and ambitions of other people in society (Williams 2002). Williams tells a story about Ann and Bob. They are twins who, but for sex, are identical, including having the same ambition to combine parenting with paid work. But in their society, this similarity is atypical of women and men. In their society, we are to imagine, “most men prefer to be ideal workers rather than co-parents or homemakers, whereas most women prefer to be co-parents rather than homemakers or ideal workers” (31). As a result of other people’s ambitions and tastes for work/family life balance, Bob will be more able than Ann to attain their shared ideal of a valuable life. “With fewer potential partners who prefer to share the domestic costs of child care, [Ann] will be more likely to make larger career sacrifices than Bob when she becomes a parent or may have to forgo children if she decided instead to become an ideal worker” (31). Given the asymmetry in life chances for Ann and Bob generated by other people’s tastes and ambitions, and given that Ann and Bob have impeccably equal resources and equal ambitions, it seems bad if Ann ends up worse off than Bob and is required to shoulder all the costs on her own.

How does Dworkin reply to these critiques? He argues it is an error to suppose that “‘other people’s tastes and preferences are matters of the kind of luck that can relieve us of consequential responsibility for our acts or circumstances’” (Dworkin, quoted in Matravers 2002: 561). In at least two places, Dworkin asserts that other people’s tastes and ambitions simply form part of the background against which we make our choices, and should not be part of what justice judges. He writes, “The mix of personal ambitions, attitudes and preferences that I find in my community, or the overall state of the world’s resources, is not in itself either fair or unfair to me; on the contrary, that mix is among the facts that fix what it is fair or unfair for me to do or to have” (2000: 298). Matt Matravers suggests that Dworkin has thus introduced a new distinction with respect to luck that modifies his famous distinction between brute and option luck. This is a distinction between ‘cosmic luck’ and ‘luck that can be fair or unfair’ (Matravers 2002: 561).

Dworkin rules out other people’s opinions, ambitions and choices as relevant grounds for claims of redress. “Government,” he writes, “should strive to insure than any differences in the degree to which people are not equally capable of realizing happiness and the other

---

7 Williams mounts this argument to demonstrate that Amartya Sen’s capability approach represents a genuine alternative to equality of resources and welfare. In Sovereign Virtue (Chapter 7), Dworkin has argued that capability equality collapses either into welfarism or resourcism. Williams tries to disprove this by showing how capability equality can conceptualise “preference-based gender inequality” (Williams 2002), whereas Dworkin’s theory cannot.
‘complex’ achievements should be attributable to differences in their choices and personality and the choices and personality of other people, not to differences in the personal and impersonal resources they command” (Dworkin 2000: emphasis added). The social preferences that generate unequal opportunities for Ann and Bob to live the valuable life to which they both aspire, for Dworkin, just part of the background which can be neither just nor unjust to Ann.

As far as Williams’s example is concerned, Dworkin argues that it aligns him with welfare equality, rather than constitutes a defense of capability equality, as Williams intended. “[Williams’s] claim is not different in structure from the claim that many proponents of equality of welfare have advanced: that it is unfair when some people have more welfare than others because what they need to satisfy their in-built preferences is also wanted by others and so is in short supply and expensive” (Dworkin 2002: 138).

Matravers says with a distinction between cosmic luck and luck that can be fair or unfair, Dworkin admits that his theory will not compensate people for certain outcomes even if it is known that their active choice played no role in those outcomes. “Dworkin’s reply to Cohen’s expensiveness argument, then, is to admit that Cohen is right to ascribe expensiveness to chance, but wrong to think that it is the kind of chance that can be fair or unfair (and so the kind of chance that can give rise to questions of redistribution)” (Matravers 561). For Matravers, the problem with Dworkin’s response seems to be that it reveals an inconsistency in his use of the notion of individual responsibility. Cohen would likely say (though I’m not sure Miller, Williams or Matravers would agree) that this inconsistency suggests we should prefer welfare over resource equality.

However, another problem that lurks behind these is the thought that Dworkin’s response is wrong because it accepts without comment the impact on women’s lives of sexist gender norms enforcing women’s primary responsibility for caregiving. Of course, Dworkin explicitly brackets social injustice such as sexism at the outset of his theory (Dworkin 2000; 2002: 137). With Ingrid Robeyns, I do not find this response adequate. “Dworkin’s egalitarian theory is structurally unable to account for the cultural aspects of gender, race, and other dimensions of human diversity that create unjust inequalities between people” (Robeyns 2003: 541). In Williams’s story, the contingent preferences of others, consistent with gender norms, produce gender inequality. Dworkin’s theory evades condemnation of the situation by consigning sexist norms to a category of cosmic bad luck.

So far, we have looked at why critics believe Dworkin’s principle of individual responsibility is problematic. Does this mean welfare versions of responsibility-catering equality get off the hook? No. The remaining critiques apply to both welfare- and resource-based responsibility-catering equality.

III. Critics assert that responsibility-catering equality is bad because, as egalitarians, we should not always hold people responsible for the full costs of their disadvantages, even if voluntarily chosen. Andrew Mason, for example, presents us with the case of a woman who chooses to give up her career in order to look after her children herself (Mason
Even though she recognises her own conformity with sexist norms she would prefer to see abolished, she still maintains that she should raise her children herself. She has personally foreseen the consequences of her actions and has accepted the costs that come with them. For Mason, the career-sacrificing mother helps to make the point that just because someone is fully responsible for her situation – in the sense that she has made informed choices leading to it – that does not mean as a society we therefore require her to bear all the costs associated with it. Mason argues that responsibility-catering seems to “entail giving up the idea that a commitment to equality requires us to meet certain needs regardless of how they came about” (Mason 2000).

Mason’s example illustrates one side of a more general critique of responsibility-catering equality. This objection says that that doctrine doesn’t track people’s ordinary morality in the area of personal responsibility. On one hand, people generally do not believe that the presence of personal responsibility for a bad (or good) outcome means that I must suffer (or enjoy) all the costs (or benefits) of it. This is evident in our intuition that we must aid victims of car accidents, even if they chose not to insure against accident or injury or if they were wilfully reckless. It is also evident, according to Samuel Scheffler, in the “prevailing” public opinion that rich people may be allowed to keep assets that they have not actually earned and are therefore not directly responsible for (Scheffler 2003a: 6). On the other hand, people generally do not believe that the absence of personal responsibility for a bad outcome means that a person should be completely exonerated for it. As Matravers writes, “A selfish person who behaves shoddily to another is not necessarily relieved of responsibility for this by saying how much he wishes he were not selfish, even if he is sincere” (2002: 568).

According to critics, responsibility-catering equality is bad because of its intrusiveness and its close scrutiny of some individuals’ lives and conduct. It will not always be obvious what portion of a person’s condition is down to her choices and what portion to chance. Intrusive questions to figure this out is unavoidable in a responsibility-catering equality scheme. However, as Jonathan Wolff has argued, the impact is asymmetrical. Poor people who seek benefits must account for themselves and their behaviour publicly and regularly. Rich people do not have to say how they got their wealth. This leads to a society where some people are routinely mistrusted. Thus, in implementing responsibility-catering equality, the entitlement of all citizens to be trusted as equals and to be shown respect is destroyed.

Wolff continues that responsibility-catering equality is bad not only at the practical level of implentation, but also at the ideal level. This is because, in principle, understanding oneself as a failure is a prerequisite to aid in a responsibility-catering scheme. He demonstrates this through a discussion of unemployed individuals who need help from the state:

---

8 In fact, Mason’s argument is directed against Dworkin’s view. But it seems to me the general idea – that in egalitarian theory, an admission of personal responsibility oughtn’t always and automatically be met with punishment (such as denial of benefits) – holds against welfare equality too.
Consider now the case of someone who is unemployed at a time of low unemployment and no particular shortage of jobs. To qualify for welfare benefits this person will have to show that he or she does not have the opportunities that others have. But, by hypothesis, there is no lack of objective opportunity. Therefore the failure, if there is one, is subjective: it is the lack of talent or aptitude for the jobs that are available. To press a claim, then, one is required not merely to admit but to make out a convincing case that one is a failure, unable to gain employment even when there is no difficulty for others (114).

In the area of employment benefits, responsibility-catering equality in principle requires potential recipients to personally confront and then publicly confess their absence of talent. Shame, loss of self-respect and loss of equal respect-standing in society are the inevitable results. Wolff concludes that a non-responsibility-catering benefit system would be preferable. An unconditional basic income (UBI) scheme would not quiz individuals about why they don’t have a job. The jobless might therefore retain their self-respect because they can believe that the reason they don’t have a job is because they choose not to. Articulating such a choice would, of course, disqualify a claimant for assistance in a responsibility-catering scheme.

While Wolff’s discussion focuses mainly on the problems posed by responsibility-catering for the jobless, Elizabeth Anderson generalizes his worry that responsibility-catering equality entails shame, disrespect and social stigma (1999: 302-7). Welfare versions of responsibility-catering equality compensate people for harms – including, for example, ugliness or stupidity – traceable to bad luck. In doing so, responsibility-catering equality takes what I might think is a private affliction to be borne privately and puts an official stamp of recognition on my innate inferiority. Thus, as Anderson argues, responsibility-catering equality requires people to lay claim to the “resources of egalitarian distribution in virtue of their inferiority [including, for some, inferior intelligence, looks and talents] to others, not in virtue of their equality to others” (306).

V. Backing off slightly from the up-close critiques reviewed so far, responsibility-catering equality also a broader criticisms, of which I can say just a little here. Responsibility-catering equality inclines us towards a view that predisposes us to think of how individuals are responsible for their suffering, rather than asking about structural factors. This problem may arise from the use of the overly broad categories of choice and chance. Arneson writes: “Some people are blessed with good luck, some are cursed with bad luck, and it is the responsibility of society… to alter the distribution of goods and evils from the jumble of lotteries that constitutes human life as we know it…” (Arneson, forthcoming, quoted in Anderson 1999: 289-90). Although Arneson has used the term ‘evils,’ this view actually conceptualises a social world cleansed of the sort of evils that should actually concern egalitarians. As Phillips observes, “The cause of the bad luck becomes incidental. It no longer matters much whether it arose from genetic disorder, from racism or sexism, or the rules governing the inheritance of money; and
since the cause of the bad luck is no longer the issue, there is less interest in identifying which ones are open to structural change” (Phillips 2004: 17).9

VI. In responsibility-catering egalitarianism, there is a strange disconnect between the importance placed on the responsibility-catering apparatus of the theory and the almost blithe admission that such an apparatus would completely elude us in real life. As we have seen, it is crucial to responsibility-catering egalitarianism that a reliable account of individual responsibility is available. Yet proponents are the first to admit that their method confronts a serious information-gathering problem. “In actual political life under modern conditions,” Arneson writes, “distributive agencies will be staggeringly ignorant of the facts that would have to be known in order to pinpoint what level of opportunity for welfare different persons have had” (Arneson 1989: 87). And, later, Arneson refers to the “futility of devising governmental policies that would vary treatment of individuals according to their lifetime responsibility levels” (Arneson 2002: 199).

In the literature, the disconnect prompts two related criticism about responsibility-catering equality’s methodology. Wolff and McKinnon suggest it is bad because the methodology divorces ideal theory from real political practice (Wolff 1998; McKinnon 2003: 156). Wolff urges responsibility-catering theorists to accept the proposal that “the task of the egalitarian political philosopher is not completed by finding the fairest principles of justice” through its typically, abstract, two-person models (102). These critiques suggest that responsibility-catering equality is bad to the extent that it promotes abstract moral principles that egalitarians would not actually endorse in real life (Wolff 1998: 120).10 The second point proposes that the philosophical project of egalitarianism would actually be improved by greater attention to the practical realities of political life (Cf. Anderson 1999)11.

3. A non-responsibility-catering egalitarianism?

I have been struck by the way that self-described egalitarians have recently proposed alternative approaches that are non-responsibility-catering. These include proposals both for unconditional basic income (UBI) schemes (Cf. McKinnon 2003; Wolff 1998) and sufficiency schemes (Cf. Anderson 1999).12 My reading of this anti-responsibility-

---

9 Similarly, Timothy Hinton has written that the language of luck and choice seems particularly unfortunate if its use ends up having us subsume the conditions that blacks in South Africa had to deal with under apartheid as an instance of ‘bad luck.’

10 “What is the good of a more ‘principled’ view if it leads to an endorsement of policies that egalitarians should not willingly accept?” asks Wolff (120).

11 This is an old complaint: John Locke: “… a principle may be so nearly true as to deserve theoretical respect, and yet may lead to practical consequences which we feel to be absurd. There is therefore a justification for common sense in philosophy, but only as showing that our theoretical principles cannot be quite correct so long as their consequences are condemned by an appeal to common sense which we feel to be irresistible” (Quoted in Bertrand Russell (1994: 586)).

12 UBI is typically seen as an egalitarian ideal while sufficiency schemes are not. Instead of developing an argument about the attractiveness of both as against RCE, I focus on sufficiency in what follows. Nevertheless, it seems the two traditions can be run together insofar as neither represents a direct attack on income inequality. I gather UBI gains its association with equality because it stipulates that the state give to each person the same amount. But it is clear that the small unconditional income that UBI proposals typically envision will represent some individuals’ entire income, while for others that amount will be
catering literature is not that it is saying people should never be held responsible for their actions. Rather, I read it as a more modest attempt to decentre individual responsibility as the “touchstone” of egalitarianism since it entails at least those problems we have just reviewed.

Arneson contends that “A proposed theory of justice that excludes [a responsibility-catering element] excludes a factor that is intrinsically morally important” (2000a: 348). So perhaps ‘non-responsibility-catering liberal egalitarianism’ is a contradiction in terms. Matravers seems wedded to this idea, stating that the “distinction between choice and chance goes to the heart of the liberal nature of liberal egalitarianism” (2002: 560). This, despite the fact that he has offered good arguments demonstrating the incoherence at the heart of Dworkin’s theory. My aim is to locate and begin to sketch a non-responsibility-catering egalitarianism, and we can leave to one side the further question of whether or not it has an authentically liberal pedigree.

If we want to avoid reckoning individuals’ responsibility for their suffering and we want to avoid making redistribution conditional on that deserving/undeserving distinction, how should we do this? The doctrine of sufficiency offers one possible route.

Harry Frankfurt (1987) has defended sufficiency as superior to a norm of economic equality in the context of distributive justice. He defines the norm of economic equality as saying ‘it is desirable for all to have the same amounts of wealth and income (or money, for short)’ (1987: 21). He defines the norm of sufficiency as saying, ‘what is morally important with respect to money is for everyone to have enough’ (1987: 22). Sufficiency erases the distinction between deserving and undeserving people by guaranteeing to all a minimum level of functioning, regardless of each person’s culpability for their condition.

Frankfurt asserts that political philosophers’ real concern for sufficiency masquerades as concern for economic equality. We know this because of the asymmetry in our intuitions about gaps in wealth between, say, very poor and middle class families, on one hand (we feel this is bad), and an identical-sized gap in wealth between rich and super-rich families (we don’t care about this) (Frankfurt 1987: 32-33). This shows that economic egalitarians are confused about their motivations. They wrongly believe it is about the gap or inequality per se, when in fact they are actually concerned about the absolute badness of poverty. Frankfurt deconstructs a passage by Ronald Dworkin to prove this claim. Dworkin’s passage reads: “A substantial minority of Americans are chronically laughably insignificant. As well, UBI and sufficiency are alike in a way significant for this paper: i.e. they both supply benefits unconditionally and are therefore non-responsibility-catering. In the context of questions about the role of individual responsibility, UBI falls on the side of sufficiency and not on the side of ‘traditional’ egalitarianism. 13 Although in another place, he seems to suggest that responsibility could be instrumentally, not intrinsically, valuable to his version of prioritarianism: “If arranging institutions to reward undeserving or irresponsible agents establishes perverse incentives that operate over time to lower productivity to the point that the weighted well-being sum is less than it could be if incentives were better structured, then prioritarianism demands the better structure of incentives that would result in maximization over the long run. Prioritarianism, like utilitarianism, accommodates deservingness and responsibility as instrumental values” (Arneson 2000b: 96).
unemployed or earn wages below any realistic ‘poverty line’ or are handicapped in various ways or burdened with special needs; and most of these people would do the work necessary to earn a decent living if they had the opportunity and capacity” (Quoted in Frankfurt 1987: 33). Frankfurt asserts: “Dworkin is dismayed most fundamentally not by evidence that the US permits economic inequality but by evidence that it fails to insure that everyone has enough to lead a life of choice and value…” (34).

For these and other reasons, Frankfurt argues that in the realm of “money” (shorthand for both income and wealth (1987: 21)) we should aim to ensure that everyone has enough, rather than equal amounts. This is quite a general description of the doctrine, so a few more words about it might be useful. It notes that what counts as ‘enough’ will vary from society to society, as well as over time. Nevertheless, it supposes that each society can define a level or threshold of resources the possession of which by each individual means he or she can live a minimally decent life. Sufficiency is devoted to getting as many individuals as possible to attain or surpass the threshold. Once they do, individuals’ comparative amounts of money or resources are not a concern.14

Are we limited to Frankfurt’s view? Who else has offered sufficiency approaches to distributive justice? According to Arneson, Michael Walzer, Elizabeth Anderson and Martha Nussbaum join Frankfurt in promoting sufficiency (2002: 174). Arneson asserts that Walzer’s theory of justice version comprises three main claims:

(1) regarding the distribution of income and wealth, what matters morally is that everyone should have enough, (2) a person has enough when poverty does not block her from being a full member of democratic society, and (3) provided everyone has enough, that some people have more income and wealth than others violates no fundamental principle of justice or morality (2002: 173).

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to note that Arneson believes Anderson’s theory of equality develops Walzer’s sufficiency doctrine (174).

---

14 This is the bare view. But proponents have recognised that if some nuances are not introduced to the doctrine, it will have harsh consequences. For example, suppose we have 100 resource units to distribute. We could channel all 100 units to a single, very badly-off individual and she still might not trip the threshold. Meanwhile, ten thousand individuals who are just barely over the threshold (i.e. are living only minimally decent lives) could enjoy much better lives if those units were (somehow) divided amongst them. Sufficiency assigns too much moral weight to ‘threshold-tripping’. The response to this problem is to alter strict sufficiency by adding a weighting principle. This means that a sufficiently large benefit to someone who is better off can outweigh a tiny benefit to someone who is worse off. With this alteration, sufficiency comes to resemble prioritarianism. Both use weighted wellbeing judgments to determine distributions. However, sufficiency will not make the second adjustment that Arneson’s RCP does – the adjustment that is made to reflect the degree of responsibility of each individual for her present condition (2000b: 97).
From the point of view of a norm of economic equality, sufficiency faces serious objections. Arneson provides an impressive catalogue of these objections in an article which argues against the “Walzerian version of sufficientarianism and also against the more general doctrine” (Arneson 2002: 175). In my view, Anderson’s overall egalitarian approach pairs sufficiency in some domains with principles of equality in others, so the resemblances between a generic sufficiency view and Anderson’s theory are slight. Thus, rather than asking ‘how has sufficiency been criticised?’ it seems more economical to ask ‘how has Anderson’s view been criticised?’ Through this more focused discussion we will still be able to access key difficulties with ‘generic’ sufficiency, while at the same time seeing what peculiar problems Anderson’s theory encounters.

Before we move on to those more specific critiques, it seems worth noting that Arneson appears to holds a view that presumes egalitarianism and sufficiency are enemies. This view extends to the thought that political theorists who promote sufficiency must be hostile to egalitarianism. Egalitarian philosophers tend to cite Frankfurt’s essay with a view to showing how the two ideals are mutually exclusive. On one hand, his essay does lend itself to the view that equality and sufficiency are enemy doctrines and mutually exclusive: Frankfurt argues that egalitarianism is bad because it is confused and because it contributes to unpleasant personal and sociological conditions. But on the other hand, it should be noted that he promotes sufficiency as a superior alternative to not just any kind of egalitarianism, but specifically to economic egalitarianism. So we might want to say that other critics of equality – the ones I’ve been considering here – agree with Frankfurt on the second point, but not on the first. These critics mean to support the wider aims of egalitarianism. So the thought that promotion of sufficiency inherently means one is an enemy of egalitarianism is too broad.

4. Anderson’s Theory of Equality

Anderson’s alternative to responsibility-catering ‘luck’ egalitarianism is ‘democratic equality.’ It has a different vision of the key point of egalitarian justice than luck egalitarianism: “The proper negative aim of egalitarian justice is not to eliminate the impact of brute luck from human affairs, but to end oppression, which by definition is socially imposed. Its proper positive aim is not to ensure that everyone gets what they morally deserve, but to create a community in which people stand in relations of equality to others” (289). Anderson’s view is complex. She follows several political theorists,

---

15 For example, Frankfurt believes that economic egalitarianism causes me to become alienated from myself and my true desires since I go around restlessly (and pointlessly, in his view) comparing my wealth with others’ wealth all the time. He asserts that the doctrine of equality “contributes to the moral disorientation and shallowness of our time” (23).

16 Anderson’s is not the only non-responsibility-catering theory. John Rawls’s theory of justice as fairness (Rawls 1999) is also said to be non-responsibility-catering (Cf. Daniels 2003; McKinnon 2003; Scheffler 2003a). This is a matter of some dispute, since other theorists suggest Rawls initiated the modern liberal egalitarian aspiration to eliminate luck from morality (Cf. Kymlicka 2002: Ch 3). In any event, given the relative status of Rawls and Anderson, it might be said that in defending Anderson’s non-responsibility-catering egalitarianism, I am backing the wrong horse. However, if I can show that Anderson’s model is good on its own, then whatever features it turns out to share with Rawls’s much more developed account would seem to lend it even more authority. I shall not consider similarities and differences between Rawls’s and Anderson’s democratic equality models here.
including Amartya Sen (Sen 1992), for his capability approach to inequality (316-319); Nancy Fraser (Fraser 1998), for the notion that maldistribution and misrecognition are distinct, irreducible and sometimes conflicting types of injustice (314); and Iris Marion Young (Young 1990a), for the notion that liberal justice is trapped in a ‘distributive paradigm’ that impedes conceptualizing injustice as primarily about oppression, exploitation and hierarchical social relations (312; 319). These three theorists themselves do not always agree with one another.17 So, in some ways, Anderson is attempting a lot in trying to synthesise elements from each of these literatures. However, feminist critiques of mainstream distributive justice represent a shared background for Sen, Fraser, Young, as well as Anderson.

Anderson hopes that the ideal of democratic equality will ‘refocus’ egalitarian theorising in at least three ways. First, democratic equality conceives of justice as being primarily concerned about citizens’ obligations towards one another: “what citizens ultimately owe one another is the social conditions of the freedoms people need to function as equal citizens” (320). Through the mechanisms of the state, citizens must guarantee to one another the capabilities that are fundamental to the ability to stand as an equal citizen and equal moral agent. Citizens must have “effective access” to these capabilities “over the course of their whole lives” (314). The influence of Sen’s work seems evident here both in terms of conceptualising capability as the appropriate space for interpersonal comparisons and in the fact that Anderson, like Sen, refrains from offering a definite list of capabilities.

A second way Anderson’s ideal refocuses egalitarian theorising is to alter the scope of justice. She asserts that democratic equality applies “judgments of justice to human arrangements, not to the natural order. This helps us see that people, not nature, are responsible for turning the natural diversity of human beings into oppressive hierarchies” (336). This stipulation means that, unlike some versions of responsibility-catering equality, democratic equality doesn’t view all unchosen disadvantages as liable for compensation. So this shrinks the scope of justice in one way.18 But in another way, democratic equality gives justice a wider remit. Anderson argues that responsibility-catering equality takes many of the basic structures of society – such as the division of labour between ‘skilled’ and ‘unskilled’ jobs – for granted, and assumes that people will slot into a natural hierarchy based on intelligence and talent. Democratic equality criticises the assumptions about talents behind these arrangements, and instead

17 Sen, for example, stands apart from Young because he has engaged in the ‘equality of what?’ debate that she criticizes (Sen 1980; Young 2001). Fraser and Young have clashed over the ‘dualist’ and ‘pentagonist’ tendencies of their respective models of injustice (Fraser 1997; Young 1997).
18 Anderson uses the example of compensation for Deaf persons to illustrate the difference that her understanding of the scope of justice makes. Suppose I am born deaf. Since this is an unchosen disadvantage, responsibility-catering equality recommends that I be compensated for my disadvantage. Anderson’s view does not presuppose that we can read ‘unchosen disadvantage’ off the fact of someone’s deafness. Democratic equality would “ensure that the deaf have equal access to civil society, but not that they be compensated for the loss of the pleasures of hearing itself. Yet [according to some luck equality views] the lives of the deaf are less happy for lacking these pleasures, and should be compensated on that account” (333).
encourages us to appreciate that ways that “everyone benefits from the diversity of talents and roles in society” (326).

A third way Anderson’s approach refocuses egalitarian theorising is by rejecting the notion that the possession of equal amounts of some private good is all it takes to make two people equal. Instead, democratic equality appeals to a “relational theory of equality” (312). This aspect brings her theory in touch with a tradition in political philosophy which insists that equality is fundamentally an ideal about social relations, not distributive patterns. Wolff and de Shalit assert that relational egalitarianism says that the task is “not to distribute goods the right way but to create the right types of relationships between people; avoiding oppression, exploitation, domination, servility, snobbery and other hierarchical evils” (Wolff and de-Shalit Forthcoming). The assumption of Anderson’s approach seems to be that we can have what we would recognize as an egalitarian society even without coming close to economic equality because citizens’ equality will be expressed in other ways.

In what ways is Anderson’s theory non-responsibility-catering, at least in the way that the previous accounts cater? It says that all individuals’ should have at least a miminum level of certain goods. It does not matter if someone has been reckless or lazy or unlucky: if a person is below the threshold in terms of a good that society has identified as essential to equal citizenship, the theory recommends that she be supplied with the good. However, through limiting the goods that the state must provide to all citizens, Anderson believes she deals with problems of individual responsibility. Her model “avoids bankruptcy at the hands of the imprudent by limiting the range of goods provided collectively and expecting individuals to take personal responsibility for the other goods in their possession” (289). Louis’s champagne-deprived condition would not be a concern for Andersons’ view. Why? Because unless it could be shown that Louis’s condition makes it impossible for him to function as a human being, as a participant in a system of cooperation and as an equal citizen, he has no grounds for complaint under her egalitarian theory. “To function as a human being, one needs adequate nutrition. To eat without being relegated to a subhuman status, one needs access to sources of nutrition besides pet food or the dumpster. But to be able to function as a dignified human being, one does not need the quantity or quality of food intake as a gourmet,” writes Anderson. “Democratic equality therefore requires that everyone have effective access to adequate nutrition, as well as sources of nutrition that one’s society considers dignified” (320). A limited number of goods will be distributed with an eye to what is essential to secure the social conditions of everyone’s freedom over a lifetime. Moreover, she writes, “effective access to a level of functioning means that people can achieve that functioning by deploying means already at their disposal, not that the functioning is unconditionally guaranteed without any effort on their own part” (318).

_________________________________________

19 Several theorists concerned with competing conceptions of egalitarianism (Cf. Hinton 2001; Miller 1997; Norman 1998; Scheffler 2003a, 2003b; Williams 1971) articulate versions of the relational view of equality.
In what ways is Anderson’s theory a sufficiency approach? She does use the language of sufficiency from time to time. For example, she writes that, “once all citizens enjoy a decent set of freedoms, sufficient for functioning as an equal in society, income inequalities beyond that point do not seem so troubling in themselves” (1999: 326). This is where Anderson cites Walzer’s theory; to my knowledge, it is the only place she explicitly follows his view. And there are other places where Anderson argues that what matters is that people have “good enough” access or “sufficient” wages – not perfectly equal access and wages – to function as equals in society (see, for example, pp 334, 335). But coming within the context of rich and detailed account of what Anderson believes functioning as an equal in society actually entails (see especially pp 317-318), the notion that democratic equality, ideally realized, would entail a meagre, poverty-line existence for some individuals seems strained.

5. How has Anderson’s theory been criticised?

This section discusses several critiques of Anderson’s view. Some are made by luck egalitarians and take up various aspects of her theory, constituting part of the growing literature around debates on luck egalitarianism. Others criticisms do not emerge directly from these debates and have not been intended as direct critiques of Anderson’s view, but examining them should help to clarify some of the more significant differences between Anderson’s egalitarianism and the responsibility-catering approach.

I. Arneson suggests that much of the attractiveness of Anderson’s theory is a function of the fact that it is offered as a rough-and-ready guide to public policy (Arneson 2000a, 2002). Thus, when defenders of responsibility-catering equality take up Anderson’s claims, their first line of defense is usually an appeal to the ideal/non-ideal theoretical division. G.A. Cohen, for examples, writes that Anderson’s analysis is “disfigured by failure to distinguish between rejection of the luck egalitarian view as a proposed principle of regulation and rejection of it at the fact-insensitive fundamental level at which the view is properly pitched.” He continues, “Thus much (not all) of Elizabeth Anderson’s broadside against the luck-egalitarian view of justice highlights the effect of striving to implement the luck egalitarian principle without compromise. But difficulties of implementation, just as such, do not defeat luck egalitarianism as a conception of justice, since it is not a constraint on a sound conception of justice that it should always be sensible to strive to implement it, whatever the factual circumstances may be” (Cohen 2003: 244). Similarly, Arneson writes, “You cannot refute a moral principle that tells us we ought to achieve a certain aim to the greatest extent that is possible by pointing out (what is surely true) that some seemingly sensible ways of trying to achieve this aim would be counterproductive. Such a refutation only shows that the policies proposed for fulfilling the principle would be unsuccessful. They leave the principle untouched” (Arneson 2000b).

If her framework is attractive (and I think it must be, at least for those who are willing to countenance the extension of egalitarian discourse to non-economic inequalities) then why does engagement with it begin (and, in Cohen’s piece, end) with the defensive appeal to the ideal/non-ideal distinction? This suggests an unwillingness on the part of responsibility-catering adherents to take up Anderson on her own terms. More support
for this claim – that critics are unwilling to take up Anderson on her own terms – is suggested by the way Arneson aligns Walzer, Anderson, and Martha Nussbaum on the basis that they each support a version of the sufficiency doctrine (2002: 174). This seems an ungenerous reading of all three. Although sufficiency is as aspect of their theories, that is surely overshadowed by other features, such as the fact that they all conceptualise human goods as irreducibly plural. All argue that an adequate theory of justice must not suppose that a loss in one essential good (e.g. bodily integrity) can be made up for by surplus in another (e.g. wealth), as monist theories like Arneson’s. The basic intuition for the tradition of social justice to which these three writers contribute is that it is unhelpful to understand equality as merely a distributive ideal aimed at equalizing people in a single dimension of their lives.

II. A second criticism is that if we manage to uncover a fundamental moral principle in Anderson’s non-abstract theory, then that principle turns out to be sufficiency, and therefore Anderson’s view is bad because it is a sufficiency view (Arneson 2000: 347; 2002): “Democratic equality holds that once someone is above the basic capability threshold, justice is unconcerned with whether or not his life goes better or worse” (Arneson 2000: 347). Arneson poses a situation where a tax policy can be designed to benefit either those who are far above the threshold or those who are just barely above the threshold. “Unfortunately someone’s ox must be gored. Whose? Responsibility-catering prioritarianism says that on the facts as described, other things equal we should favor the worse off in order to fulfill the requirements of justice. Democratic equality says that the issue is a ‘don’t care’ from the standpoint of justice” (Arneson 2000: 347).

Is he right? At this level of bare abstraction, things look good for RCP. Since we do not know anything about these two groups beyond their income bracket, it is hard to say if there might be other things about these groups that will make the issue something democratic equality does care about. We can imagine that a tax decision in favour of the well-off group and against the threshold-proximal group might make it harder for the latter group to purchase transportation (petrol, bus fare…) to get them to the polling station on election day. If the tax policy has this result, then democratic equality has an independent reason for favouring the threshold-proximal group. If cash barriers prevent a group from exercising a right as fundamental to equal citizenship as voting, then democratic equality has clearly been violated, giving it a reason to care about the tax policy decision.

Conditioning money distributions on the basis of their impact on citizenship might seem hopelessly unprincipled and intuitionistic to someone like Arneson. But it is a familiar move among those who promote relational egalitarianism. I take it Anderson fits into this group. David Miller, for example, has argued for an understanding of equality as social or status equality. It obtains when “each members regards him- or herself as fundamentally the equal of all the others, and is regarded by the others as fundamentally their equal” (1997: 92). Social equality can obtain “despite the fact that in particular spheres, achievements and holdings of goods are visibly unequal” (Miller 1990: 95). Although it is not a distributive ideal of equality, Miller argues that it has implications for

---

distributive justice. Social equality needs to be supported by an understanding that “every citizen should enjoy a set of rights that go beyond civil and political rights to embrace the social rights that make citizenship a real possibility: nobody can be an equal citizen while sleeping in a cardboard box on the Thames embankment” (1997: 94). This is reminiscent of Anderson’s discussion about how the demands of equal citizenship can regulate what is understood as sufficient in terms of people’s nutritional needs. The material conditions that a robust notion of equal citizenship entails modify sufficiency. For those theorists who understand equality as a broad ideal, encompassing notions of political and civil equality as well as economic concerns, the idea of enforcing sufficiency in the material domain is more palatable.

III. A related objection to the one just canvassed says that Anderson’s view might be criticised for failing to impose any limits on the degree of economic inequality permitted in a society. Anne Phillips has asked if sufficiency means that “it becomes morally insignificant whether income differentials range from 1:10 or 1:100, so long as no one is deprived of what is necessary to life” (1999: 62). This problem does loom in Anderson’s account. She writes, “Once all citizens enjoy a decent set of freedoms, sufficient for functioning as an equal in society, income inequalities beyond that point do not seem so troubling in themselves. The degree of acceptable income inequality would depend in part on how easy it was to convert income into status inequality – differences in the social bases of self-respect, influence over elections and the like. The stronger the barriers against commodifying social status, political influence, and the like, the more acceptable are significant income inequalities” (1999: 326).

This passage suggests that Anderson’s view is probably vulnerable to the worry Phillips outlines. However, some of the same mechanisms described in the response above would probably kick in here too; that is, considerations based on an ideal of equality of social status and equal citizenship would likely impose limits on economic inequalities. For me, is not fatal to Anderson’s view to prove that she ends up promoting sufficiency in some cases, because we must also consider what she is promoting in the other dimensions of equality. In any event, before we decide that great income inequality afflicts only Anderson’s framework, we should ask what sorts of limits responsibility-catering equality imposes on income differentials. Since the general ethic of responsibility-catering equality says that “inequalities that arise through processes of voluntary choice or faulty conduct for which the agents can reasonably be held responsible” are acceptable, in principle, if I voluntarily gamble away all my money, get thrown out of my flat and begin to starve, it need not do anything for me.

At times, liberal egalitarians get on a high horse as the putative defenders of economic equality. The response from economic egalitarians when criticised for failing to take adequate notice of non-material inequalities is to go on the offensive. For example, in a retort to Samuel Scheffler, Dworkin announces: “It is hardly enough to say (although many political philosophers apparently think it is enough) that society owes everyone care for their most basic needs, but not economic equality” (2003: 198). This is interesting because it implicitly suggests that Dworkin says society owes everyone economic equality.
If we squint at it very hard, it might be possible to see a way in which Dworkin’s theory says society owes everyone economic equality. But the truth is, Dworkin’s theory really does not say this. Nor do the closely related theories of the other responsibility-catering equality schemes examined here. All of them, at the end of the day, promote a form of equality of opportunity. None promote an equality of outcome in which the ‘economic equality’ Dworkin alludes to could be at least a feature of the vision. As Chris Armstrong notes, “not one of the major liberal egalitarians believes justice to be primarily bound up with what we actually end up with. While it would be a misrepresentation to argue that these theorists believe that the demands of egalitarian justice end after any initial distributions, they are also strongly averse to continual attempts to restore an initially egalitarian position” (Armstrong 2003: 413).

IV. Arneson argues that Anderson’s theory is bad because it aligns equality with an ideal about equal social relations rather than welfare. Arneson paraphrases one aspect of Anderson’s critique in this way:

Luck egalitarianism takes the distribution of goods and resources to be morally important in its own right, but the concern of social justice should rather be the quality of human relationships. Anderson urges that the luck egalitarians wrongly focus their attention on the distribution of privately owned goods among individuals. Against this shopping mall egalitarianism, we should insist that the point of equality is creating and sustaining a community of equals. What matters is equality in certain human relationships. So says Anderson. The issue raised here is how the egalitarian should be measuring inequality among persons (341).

Arneson then goes on to say that Anderson claims that we can compare people according to their stock of relationships with others. He says this is wrong because it actually resembles the fetishism of the resourcist view: relationships themselves are “reasonably regarded as instrumental to well-being, not morally important in themselves” (342). He says his own conception escapes the fetishism charge because what it posits as fundamentally important is how well someone’s life is going.

Now, this is odd. Because Arneson is right that Anderson was keen to get away from the materialism of luck egalitarianism; was keen to get away from assessing the justice of a society by reference to holdings of individuals. Following Young, she complains: “much recent egalitarian theorizing [is] too narrowly focussed on the distribution of divisible, privately appropriated goods, such as income and resources, or privately enjoyed goods, such as welfare” (288).

I think Arneson misunderstands Anderson’s aim. He insists on trying to read her as offering a currency. Look again at the excerpt quoted above. He correctly describes Anderson’s view of luck egalitarianism. He also correctly describes Anderson’s ethic: the point of equality is creating and sustaining a community of equals. The whole of that
excerpt, except the last line, is a comparison of two visions of egalitarian politics. But it is not a comparison of two currencies. This is where Arneson goes wrong. For in his summary statement of the comparison, Arneson says: “The issue raised here is how the egalitarian should be measuring inequality among persons.” No one can seriously think that Anderson means to suggest that the number of high quality relationships a person enjoys in her life is the currency by which we ought to compare citizens.

Arneson interprets Anderson as saying something like “People should be equalized in terms of their relationships.” But that is not the same as saying, “government should try to ensure people stand in relations of equality.” Arneson insists on interpreting her vision as a currency approach. The “issue” raised here is certainly not “measuring inequality” in the oversimplified way of luck equality.

Egalitarian theory is fundamentally about examining and justifying our social arrangements. Measuring the holdings of individuals is one way to assess our social arrangements. But as feminists have been arguing for years, it is not the only or ultimate way of assessing social arrangements. If we are locked into thinking about equality as a question mainly about the currency of equality, it is difficult to resist reading criticisms of this tradition as offering anything but a competing currency of equality. The obsession with the currency debate in liberal equality theory contributes to the thought – apparent in Arneson’s critique of Anderson – that any framework which includes sufficiency elements is itself non-egalitarian. Responsibility-catering equality doesn’t seem to be able to get to grips with relations of power and domination except when those can be translated into resources.

V. We can tell that Anderson’s view does not conform to the ‘generic’ sufficiency view that Arneson criticises by considering an objection to it, which has been well articulated by Anne Phillips. Phillips’s worry is that sufficiency threatens to distract our attention from domination and exploitation: “We might agree that the urgent issue is whether everyone in society has enough, and that addressing the condition of those worst off should be the priority for any egalitarian politics. If we continue to think however, that the rich got where they are by their ancestors’ robbery and pillage, that people working in ‘male’ fields of employment are deriving inflated salaries from the historical under-valuation of female labour, or that company executives are paying themselves the illegitimate rewards just because they have the power to do so, then the knowledge that everyone else now has enough will hardly satisfy us” (1999: 63).

As a framework of justice, Anderson’s approach seems quite invulnerable to this critique. For example, democratic equality insists that we are to regard the economy as a system of cooperative production, where every item is regarded as being jointly produced by everyone working together (321). “The principles that govern the division of labor and the assignment of particular benefits to the performance of roles in the division of labor must be acceptable to everyone” (322). With these rules in place, it seems unlikely that CEOs would be able to get away with enormous, exploitative salaries.
Conclusions….

Anderson’s theory does not resemble the theories of Dworkin, Cohen or Arneson. But this, of course, is deliberate. She is embarrassed that those theories, with their unfortunate echoes of the conservative deserving/undeserving poor distinction, are the flagbearers of contemporary egalitarian theory (Anderson 1999: 287-289). Does this dissimilarity mean hers is not an egalitarian theory? I suppose one way of answering that is to describe the wider grounds upon which it is acceptable for a theory like Anderson’s to go under the banner of egalitarian theory. That is beyond the scope of this essay but I hope it has started to lay the groundwork for that argument.
References


