

The Moral Basis of

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

JOHN W. COOPER

The goal of economic equality is best served by ensuring equality of opportunity, not imposing equality of results.

Most Americans would agree that economic equality is a desirable social goal. After all, equality and liberty are the two principal ideals of a democratic society. But is economic equality a state-imposed *equality of result* or a legally protected *equality of opportunity*? The answer to this fundamental question may help us determine whether our system measures up to the ideal of fairness.

In 1979, the *Yearbook on International Communist Affairs* reported that farm workers in Cuba received about \$120 in monthly wages while top scientists earned about \$1,200.¹ Perhaps a ten-to-one income differential for unskilled versus highly skilled employees should not surprise us, yet Cuba was and is a nation molded by a thoroughly socialist ideology. It is more than ironic that a communist country like Cuba would institutionalize a ten-to-one income distribution. We might even conclude that there is something in human nature that requires material reward systems based on the idea of proportional compensation (wages are set in proportion to the value added to a product or service by the inventor, manager, or producer of that product or service). If even ideologically egalitarian nations act against their own belief systems by utilizing incentives to increase worker

productivity and economic growth, then perhaps the reasons for doing so are logically and morally compelling.

An Equal Footing

What, in fact, most of us mean by equality is *not* equalization of income or wealth or standardization of housing or diet. We want equality of opportunity: the legal protection of our rights as producers and consumers to compete on an equal footing for the material rewards our society offers. Two "externalities" come immediately to mind.

First, some individuals are physically, mentally, or emotionally incapable of competing equally in an incentive-market economy. A limited welfare system is morally desirable because it transfers a reasonable percentage of wealth from the able-bodied to the disabled. Ideally, those who are temporarily disabled are offered sufficient incentives to return quickly to the economically productive sector.

Second, those who inherit wealth are thereby put in an advantageous economic position. Some radicals propose a confiscatory inheritance tax (and even pretend that they do so out of a commitment to equality of opportunity). But the legal right to inherit

wealth and to give it away, either during one's lifetime or after, is a constituent factor in the incentive system that produced the wealth to begin with. Take away the right to dispose freely of property, and you take away the property itself. Furthermore, inherited wealth is as often squandered as it is multiplied. We should not take moral offense at the fact that some individuals gain an "unequal" advantage as a result of inheriting wealth.

What do these ethical reflections mean for our society? First, all citizens share a right to the basic goods of the society, regardless of their ability to compete in the marketplace. All persons possess, as Jacques Maritain so eloquently put it, "the right to have a part, free of charge, depending on the possibilities of the community, in the elementary goods, both material and spiritual, of civilization. . . . food, clothing, shelter, medical treatment, schooling, and religious training."² The real political battles concerning the welfare system center around the issues of affordability and client dependency. Second, our society continues to be served—and served well—by an incentivist-market economy. Incentives produce a dynamic and growing economy. Market competition removes most decisions of production and distribution from the hands of those who would attempt to mold economic behavior to non-economic ends.

Democratic Capitalism

The system we are describing is best designated "democratic capitalist." It has, as Michael Novak points out, three basic components: a democratic polity, a primarily capitalist economy, and a pluralistic culture.³ Each component produces its own elite, who operate as its spokespersons in the arenas where public policy is formulated. For convenience we might call them the

politicians, the businesspersons, and the intellectuals. Students of our society know that the real issues are decided through a dynamic and often bitter war of ideas conducted among these three elites. By contrast, a unitary society concentrates all power—political, economic, and cultural—in the hands of a single elite. Dictatorial elites are fond of claiming to be the embodiments of justice, but there is ample historical evidence that human rights are best protected by the institutions that arise from the interplay of multiple elites and a pluralistic competition of ideas.

Democratic capitalist nations eschew equality of result and praise equality of opportunity. Furthermore, the advocates of equality of opportunity must recognize that such a policy will necessarily lead to inequality of result. And this is a good thing! Unequal accomplishments are to be expected. When people are free, everyone will surpass the majority of his or her fellows in some respects. Some will develop more intellectual prowess. Some will nurture skills of various sorts. Some will attain greater wealth than others. Some will be more philanthropic. No one can dictate these outcomes, and no one need claim that all are equally important. But we *can* celebrate the diversity. Inequality of result is only a scandal if it is caused by inequality of opportunity. The fact that college-educated persons earn several hundred thousand dollars more during their lifetimes than their non-college-educated peers is no scandal. It would be scandalous if colleges showed a preference in their admission policies on the basis of race, religion, political affiliation, or handicap.

There has been a lamentable history of inequality in our country. Solutions to historic problems are difficult to attain. We must constantly guard

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against the trap of attempting to correct real inequalities of opportunity by practicing reverse discrimination against those classes of society that previously enjoyed unfair advantages. Nothing is more destructive of the ideal of true equality than for government policy to pit one group against another. It is exceedingly difficult for individuals to be "color blind" toward those who are different. Government can and must do so, acting as an example by eliminating *all* inequalities of opportunity.

The Problem of Poverty

This means, of course, that government's short-lived experimentation with quota systems (in hiring, promotion, schooling, and so on) should be halted immediately. There is much real reform yet to be accomplished in our society. Those who care about equality have some distance to go before equal opportunity is fully realized. The important thing is to realize that equality is possible and that poverty can be overcome.

The latest figures from the Census Bureau show that there are approximately 85.4 million households in the United States (74.3 million white, 9.2 million black, and 4.3 million Hispanic—with some overlapping). Of these, 14.5 million households receive need-based benefits (food stamps, subsidized school lunches, subsidized housing, Medicaid, and so on) worth \$67.4 billion annually—an average of \$4,648 per recipient household.⁴ In 1983, 12.5 million households fell below the official poverty level (\$10,178 for a non-farm family of four)—up from 12.4 million in 1982.

A general idea of the extent of poverty in the United States ought to help us grasp two important facts: the problem is significant and it is manageable. Genuine equality of opportunity is

part of the solution to the problem of poverty. The efforts of social welfare agencies, both public and private, are another part of the solution. Needed reforms of existing tax and welfare policies are a third component. Ultimately, the incentives that are built into a market economy, if allowed to operate freely and fairly, will provide the impetus for raising the quality of life for the vast majority of Americans.

The world has seen how a mistaken notion of equality—equality of result—has led to stagnant economies and excruciating poverty in socialist countries. Surely equal opportunity, as it has evolved in the democratic capitalist nations, has a legitimate claim to moral superiority. Democratic capitalism has produced generally dynamic economies and steadily rising standards of living. And equal opportunity has been, and continues to be, a cornerstone of that system.⁵□

¹George Volsky, "Cuba," *Yearbook on International Communist Affairs*, 1979, ed. Richard F. Staar (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 1979).

²Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, trans. Doris C. Anson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p. 114.

³See Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster/American Enterprise Institute, 1982).

⁴"89% of U.S. Families Get Non-Cash Benefits," *Daily News-Record* (Harrisonburg, Virginia), March 28, 1985.

⁵For a more comprehensive discussion of this topic, see John W. Cooper, *The Theology of Freedom: The Legacy of Jacques Maritain and Reinhold Niebuhr* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1985).

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