

# Letters

## The (Im)Moral Basis of Equal Opportunity

John Cooper's article, "The Moral Basis of Equal Opportunity" (September 1985), set in bold relief critical issues and questions concerning equal opportunity, particularly economic. Essentially, he argued the moral case for equality of opportunity, rather than equality of results. While it is difficult to argue with the general thrust of Cooper's philosophy, it appears that he had difficulty in making the translation from the esoteric to the terrene. The current debates that focus on a related issue of equality of opportunity, affirmative action, suggest that basic problems center around the translation of the equal opportunity concept into practice. Cooper does not provide much help in this regard, though he does concede that government must act through example "by eliminating all inequalities of opportunity." Cooper's failure to deal with the translation-to-practice question and his exclusion of other very major considerations constitute a kind of immorality; hence, an immoral basis for equal opportunity.

*The translation problem.* It is immoral to address the question of equality of opportunity without discussing equity or fairness, a concept that is at the very heart of our legal system. Indeed, equity is the "mother's milk" of civil law. Persons who are "injured" in some manner are frequently granted equity relief (i.e., the injurer is required to take some action to restore the injured party to his or her prior condition or to compensate in some way for the present and future negative effects of the injury). In the most flagrant cases, the injurer may be required to pay punitive damages or be given a period of incarceration in a jail or prison. The point is that the injurer is required to do more than simply apologize for the injury and promise or agree to stop injuring. Affirmative action, an attempt to translate equality of opportunity into practice, must necessarily be viewed as simply the common and usual legal system approach to providing equity relief. Given that government, chiefly

at the local and state levels but also at the federal level, has been an accomplice in the creation and maintenance of inequality of opportunity, it is proper that it take action to provide equity relief for those individuals and groups so injured.

It is immoral for government simply to apologize and promise to behave properly in the future, as Cooper would have it do, or for it to allow other individuals and group accomplices to do the same. It would also be immoral for the legal system, particularly in a nation of laws, rather than men, to allow the accomplices to escape the standard equity remedies.

Frankly, Cooper, perhaps unwittingly, has opted for the approach to equality that existed in this country prior to the 1960s. Too many individuals, organizations, and governments simply said that they provided equality of opportunity, under some vague definition, until the hard data and the reality of inequality were forced into the national and international consciousness. Cooper should ask himself three questions: (1) Should the existence of equality of opportunity manifest itself in some manner? (2) If so, how? (3) Could he envision the existence of true equality of opportunity in a democratic country such as the United States resulting in employment patterns similar to those that existed in this country, say, at the turn of the century?

*Other issues and considerations.* Cooper correctly assumes, as do many, that equality of opportunity is possible and that progress in that direction has been made. However, his own figures suggest that the reduction of poverty, a commonly used index of equality of opportunity, has not progressed during the past five years. Ironically, this deterioration of progress has occurred during a period in which the principle of equality of results has been discarded or, to be more charitable, deemphasized. Other statistical data indicate deterioration in all of the usual indices of equality of opportunity, particularly minority and female employment patterns and minority college entrance rates. The point is that equality of

results, based on numerical goals, has produced some positive results; equality of opportunity at the principle level that currently exists, without a practical translation, is currently producing retrogression in the accepted indices of equality of opportunity.

If Cooper is, in fact, interested in achieving equality of opportunity, then he must support reasonable and practical use of achieving it and of assessing whether or not movement is being made in the desired direction. Since he apparently has no ideas about how this might be done, why is he so adamantly opposed to an approach that has been shown to be at least partially successful? Could it be that his opposition is based not on the failure of the equality of results approach, but rather, its success, albeit limited? Government is "acting as an example in eliminating all inequalities of opportunity" through the equality of results principle.

At a more general level, Cooper must know enough about our society to know that as a practical and scientific nation, we work best with clear, practical, and measurable objectives. The equality of results principle meets these criteria. Frankly, in my judgment, few reasonable people believe that most governmental and private organizations and agencies will achieve their affirmative action numerical goals within their lifetimes. However, the reality, given our country's unique history, is that no progress is likely to be made without the establishment of a set of goals, preferably measurable ones. It could be argued that our current state of inequality, say in employment, is the direct result of the following individual and organizational goals: (1) Have as few minorities and women as you can get by with, preferably *none*. (2) If they are hired, promote as few as possible, preferably *none*. (3) Ensure that *none* occupy the top spot in the organization or agency. Numerical parity-based goals are a reasonable and practical tool, given that adjustments will likely be necessary to address unique situations. Even assuming the achievement of a set of numerical parity-based goals, equality

of opportunity would still not be a reality, since the important issue of power distribution would, in all likelihood, be only partially resolved; but that is another issue. Unfortunately, many would be quite happy with the mere achievement of numerical parity; others would view this achievement as merely a reasonable but necessary starting point for achievement of true equality of opportunity.

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#### **Children Starting School: Readiness vs. Relative Age**

The recent article by James K. Uphoff and June Gilmore entitled, "Pupil Age at School Entrance—How Many are Ready for Success?" (September 1985) raises some extremely important issues for all educators.

However, I would like to offer a significantly different interpretation of the data than that presented by Uphoff and Gilmore. They state that the effects they have observed are the results of the "lack of readiness" of the younger "summer children" to enter school, and they go on to suggest six possible actions for dealing with such children.

While "readiness" to attend school is undoubtedly related to both short-term and long-term success in educational endeavors, "relative age" is also a significant factor. Whenever children are grouped by age for any activity, the children within each group will differ in relative age by an amount equal to the time span of the group. Thus, if students entering grade one are comprised of children born in the period from September of one year to August of the next year, then the children born in September will possess a one year relative age advantage over the children born in August of the following year. Conversely, the children born in the month of August have approximately a one year age disadvantage relative to their earlier September-born peers. As reported by Uphoff and Gilmore, these groups (children born in August and children

born the previous September) would demonstrate very different levels of achievement and success.

The support for the relative age hypothesis derives from data similar to that cited by Uphoff and Gilmore, except for one striking difference—the months of high risk and poor achievement are not necessarily the summer months. For example, in the school system for which I work (Lethbridge School District No. 51), children turning six years of age prior to December 31 in a given year are permitted to enter grade one. When we studied the students' school achievement in relation to their month of birth, we found that the autumn babies (September to December birthdays) had lower achievement and higher failure rates than their grade peers who were born at other times of the year. Conversely, children born in the months of Janu-

ary, February, and March demonstrated higher levels of achievement.

By comparing the Uphoff and Gilmore findings with those derived from Lethbridge, the support for the relative age hypothesis over the readiness hypothesis is clear. If we were to use Uphoff and Gilmore's reasoning, we would expect both summer-born and autumn-born Lethbridge students to be developmentally unready to begin school. But this is not the case. The summer-born children do very well, and the autumn children alone appear to be a high-risk group.

Therefore, it would seem that it is the younger children in any group who are at risk—not children of any particular age. It is the relative age hypothesis that predicts that the young children in a group will be at risk, and it is the relative age hypothesis that appears to handle both the Uphoff and

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Gilmore data and the data from our local school system.

Interestingly, a significant relative age effect has also been found in professional sports. Approximately 70 percent of the players entering the National Hockey League are born in the six-month period from January to June (Barnsley et al. in press). This is clearly a relative age phenomenon that dates back to young hockey players' success at nine and ten years of age (Barnsley and Thompson in preparation).

The importance of this finding is that the effect of relative age on achievement can have long-term consequences that can be dramatically demonstrated both in academic and adult career success. Older children in any group will, on average, always perform better than their younger counterparts. Older children (with relative age advantage) will also be the beneficiaries of higher teacher expectations (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968) and strive to meet these higher goals. For the older children in a group, "success breeds success," and the higher expectations of their teachers spur them on to greater performance. As a result, children with relative age advantage realize higher achievement in both the short and long term than do their peers with a relative age disadvantage.

The crux of the issue is, however, that Uphoff and Gilmore believe they can make such factors as achievement more equitable for all children, regardless of month of birth, by paying greater attention to matters related to "readiness." They suggest changing the cutoff date for school entry and altering the curriculum, reasonable suggestions considering the concept of "readiness." If, however, we apply the relative age hypothesis, then the actions suggested by Uphoff and Gilmore will have little or no effect as they fail to alter in any way children's relative age advantages or disadvantages. This is unfortunate since it will be more more difficult to find solutions to neutralize the effects of relative age.

In fact, the most that we might be

able to do is reduce the gap between the relative age advantage and disadvantage by offering several entry points or dates in the school year for beginning grade one. Reducing the range of the age grouping would thereby also reduce the difference in relative age of the students in the group. However, this solution would create extremely difficult scheduling problems both in the present and future grade placements. As a result, educational administrators with whom I have discussed this issue do not see an easy remedy.

Regardless of the pessimistic position we are currently in, the problem posed by Uphoff and Gilmore is extremely important and demands our attention. In this society, it is intolerable to think of a factor such as the month of birth being a significant variable in the achievement of success in life.

R. H. BARNESLEY

ASSOCIATE SUPERINTENDENT

STUDENT SERVICES

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### Uphoff and Gilmore Reply: Mature Starters Win Academic Success

Barnsley's premise that there will always be younger and older pupils in

each grade is obviously true. However, we found that when *all* children in a grade are chronologically older, thus developmentally more ready for today's curriculum, nearly all children (especially the younger ones) will find more success. On normative tests winners and losers exist by definition. We find that we can have many more winners on criterion/competency tests (and on many nontestable, social-emotional factors) when children are at least five years, six months of age before starting kindergarten, and six years, six months of age before they start 1st grade. Thus all of Lethbridge's pupils, and especially those entering in the fall (youngest) and summer (also very young), would benefit from the greater readiness of all to learn and to study. The Scandinavian countries do not start children in 1st grade until they reach the age of seven, and the outstanding academic

success of these children is widely documented.

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#### Swimming Lessons, Anyone?

Increasingly central office "educational leaders" are ordering the "hired hands" working with children to have whole-class reading instruction with on-grade-level basals. I wonder if similar demands are being made of swimming teachers.

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#### Staff Evaluation Is a Criterion for Administrators

I read with interest Phillip Schlechty's description of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg career ladder plan. His explanation of evaluation as a subjective process of value judgments is a helpful reminder that data collection and other objective criteria are simply sources of information.

I am somewhat puzzled, however, by his explanatory footnote: "I know of no system for evaluating principals in which the principal's evaluation of teachers is given much weight. . . ."

In previous districts where I have been employed, we consciously worked as a team to improve our teacher evaluation process. In my own district we spend a great deal of time analyzing our evaluations of teachers, even to the point of developing rubrics for holistic ratings. Our administrative evaluation system includes, as

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one important element, the effectiveness of administrators in staff evaluation and development. I suspect that my district is not unique and that Professor Schlechty will find a number of examples, both formal and informal, in which significant weight is attached to the quality of administrative evaluations.

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## Slechty Replies: Doubtful

I am sure there are examples that violate my generalization. Given the state of the art in principal evaluation generally, I doubt that such examples are widespread. If the examples are widespread, my statement is still accurate—I *know* of no such system. Now I know of one, and I would like to hear about others.

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