

# From *equality of resources* to an egalitarian theory for actual societies

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## Abstract

Over the last two decades, luck-egalitarianism has dominated academic writings about social justice. Within this strand of thought, Ronald Dworkin's *equality of resources* is widely regarded as one of the canonical approaches. Dworkin argues that people's fates should, as far as possible, be determined by their choices, including their ambitions and life plans, but should not depend on the circumstances in which they pursue their choices and ambitions. His central claim is that it is unfair that some persons, through no choice of their own have to live their lives with burdens of unchosen circumstances, while others, through only good fortune face no such hardship. As such, Dworkin's egalitarianism revolves around two questions: which elements of a person's situation are caused by brute luck – instead of being the result of genuine choice? And how should the ensuing inequalities be mitigated?

In recent years, however, Dworkin's *equality of resources* has become a subject of serious critique. For one thing, it is considered to be too ideal-theoretical, unduly abstract, and too far disconnected from actual political discussions in here-and-now societies. Moreover it is criticized for its single-minded focus on socio-economic inequalities, defending redistribution of resources through welfare state provisions, while lacking the capacity to provide practical guidance for the urgent egalitarian questions that our societies face today, for example, how “best to accommodate differences of race, gender, religion, culture, and ethnicity” (Scheffler 2003, 38). Luck-egalitarian theories are usually situated in the ideal-theoretical realm, whereas their critics are primarily interested in the *cash-value* of such theories: to what extent can a political theory, so much immersed in an ideal-theoretical methodology, contribute to the analysis of actual injustices in here-and-now societies? It is not surprising that *equality of resources* is one of the major culprits in this discussion, given the fact that Dworkin developed the theory in “the ideal world of fantasies” (Dworkin 2000, 172). I endorse Dworkin's assertion that “a conception of equality is worthless unless it describes not only an ideal egalitarian distribution, but [also] what counts as an egalitarian improvement in a patently unequal distribution” (2000, 163-164).

**This paper defends three claims.** The first is that Dworkin's ideal-theoretical argument provides the most convincing defense of the luck-egalitarian ideal; the second claim is that Dworkin's elaboration thereof in a non-ideal theory, his *theory of improvement*, revolving around ‘resource deficits’ and ‘liberty deficits’ fails to deliver practical guidance for actual societies because it remains too much within his ideal-theoretical methodology and terminology. The third claim is that there is a more promising alternative defense of a non-ideal implementation of Dworkin's luck-egalitarianism ideal, focusing on ‘social endowments’ and ‘natural endowments.’ **The aim of the paper** is to develop this alternative theory of egalitarian improvement.

**The plan of the paper** is as follows. **The first section** presents Dworkin's ideal-theoretical defense of equality of resources in the context of his thought-experiment in which a group of shipwrecked people wash ashore on a deserted island. It reconstructs the three subsequent steps in his

argument: (a) the auction that allocates the material objects on the island, explaining the importance of choice-sensitivity (b) the hypothetical insurance market against unchosen endowments, explaining the importance of chance-insensitivity; (c) the *liberty/constraint baseline*, emphasizing the importance of legal institutions to protect background justice. The devise of the 'liberty/constraint baseline' has a somewhat awkward position in equality of resources. On the one hand, Dworkin presents it as an essential and integral part of equality of resources and argues that the auction and hypothetical insurance market cannot commence before its principles are met (2000, 160). On the other hand, it is developed in a later, separate, paper as a sort of afterthought, separated from the other two central devices: the auction and the hypothetical insurance market. I will argue that these devices provide great building blocks for a constructivist theory of egalitarian justice, but that this somewhat awkward construction undermines Dworkin's attempt to provide a theory of improvement.

**In the second section** I discuss Dworkin's theory of improvement, revolving around 'recourse deficits' and 'liberty deficits.' I criticize the rather artificial and categorical distinction between the two, and the fact that Dworkin's theory of improvement oscillates between two categorically different policy proposals: redistribution of resources for mitigating the effects of handicaps and institutional reform for mitigating the effects of prejudice.

**In the third and final section** of the paper I will provide a more promising theory of improvement, that re-emphasizes Dworkin's initial point of departure that handicaps and prejudice are "structurally related" (2000: 162). Handicaps and prejudices are similar in that they affect individuals first and foremost as instances of brute bad luck, as unchosen features of a persons' endowment. When they generate morally relevant inequalities, luck egalitarianism should take them seriously and propose governmental action to mitigate these inequalities, at least to the extent that government policy can achieve this aim. To emphasize their similarities, I will discuss handicaps and prejudice in the terminology of unchosen natural and social endowments, an approach that accentuates similarities between them that remain concealed in Dworkin's theory of improvement. Natural and social endowments are similar in the sense that they generate inequalities through the *lack of fit* between certain personal attributes and a social structure in which this attribute provides comparative opportunities or disadvantages.

This alternative defense will provide a more integrated theory of egalitarian improvement. It not only focuses on socio-economic redistribution, but it is also capable of addressing a wider variety of issues of egalitarian justice. As such, it will be more helpful in the analysis of actual injustices in here-and-now societies than Dworkin's theory of improvement, and will do a better job in providing practical guidance for urgent egalitarian questions that our societies face today.