

Equality of Opportunity

In your papers, many of you thought that Nozick's theory should be amended to prevent certain kinds of discrimination. We have also seen, in Rawls' theory, arguments for the claim that certain arbitrary factors like race, sex, etc. shouldn't influence the distribution of holdings in society. This general thought seems to be explained by:

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY:

How well off we are shouldn't depend on factors outside our control.

Here is another plausible idea: we should be held responsible for our decisions. Good choices should be rewarded; bad choices should be punished. If you work hard, you deserve to prosper. If you commit a crime, you deserve to go to jail. This seems to be explained by:

MORAL DESERT:

How well off we are should depend on how good our choices have been.

Questions:

1. Are EQUAL OPPORTUNITY and MORAL DESERT mutually exclusive? What are some reasons to think that they can't both be true?

2) If the two principles are incompatible, which one should we give up? Could we amend one of them instead of giving it up entirely?

Rawls' Difference Principle

Rawls thinks that EQUAL OPPORTUNITY is not enough; if we just had EQUAL OPPORTUNITY, some members of society might still be very badly off. We also need:

DIFFERENCE:

Inequalities in holdings are only just if they benefit the worst off.

Imagine two societies, X and Y. In both communities there is a job, engineering, that's difficult and unpleasant to do, but rewards the whole community – and only the people who work hard and succeed at school can do it. The engineers in X are good-natured, and will work hard at their jobs for an average salary. The engineers in Y are self-centered and will only work hard at their jobs if they have a very high salary.

According to DIFFERENCE, the engineers in X should receive an average salary while the engineers in Y should receive a very high salary.

Questions:

1. Does this seem fair to you? Should the engineers in X get paid less just because they are good-natured?

2. Who *deserves* more money: the engineers in X, or those in Y? Or, as Rawls thinks, does "desert" have nothing to do with how much they should be paid?

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.04J / 17.01J Justice
Spring 2012

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.