
CHAPTER 2

Equality and the Family

Much moral and political philosophy is concerned to identify the proper balance between the individual's pursuit of her own interests and that concern and respect for the interests of others required by the recognition that all are of equal moral worth. As individuals, we are constantly and inevitably making choices about the extent to which we further our own well-being or restrain its pursuit for the sake of others. When it comes to politics, in our role as citizens making the rules that govern us, we have to consider the extent to which the state may properly limit individuals' pursuit of their own interests and constrain their actions in ways that will contribute to the good of others.

Compared to the unbridled pursuit of egoistic satisfaction, the family appears as a realm of altruism and self-sacrifice. Familial relationships are constituted by responsibilities and obligations. To parent a child is to be committed to supporting her at considerable cost to oneself. All parents who are doing their job properly surrender huge amounts of freedom and devote to their children substantial resources—time, energy, money—that they could have spent on themselves.¹ Where necessary, parents are often willing to risk serious harms for the sake of their children, sometimes to accept certain death. It seems hard to see how these phenomena can be captured in terms of the individual's prudence or self-interest. From this perspective, as Laurence Thomas puts it, “the project of having children can only be understood as a remarkably altruistic endeavor.”²

But from another perspective, the family looks more like an obstacle to altruism than the locus of its realization. Even if it were entirely selfless, parents' concern for their children's well-being is hardly inspired by a standpoint that treats all as equally valuable. It may be admirable to put others' well-being ahead of one's own, but when those being favored are one's own children, and that is why they are being favored, then that seems partial rather than impartial.

One is favoring particular others, and one is doing so because of their relationship to oneself. We might think of the individual as at the center of a series of concentric circles.³ As the objects of our concern move outward from the self—through immediate family, extended family, friends, fellow citizens or fellow nationals, perhaps coreligionists, to humankind as a whole (and, for some, to nonhuman animals also)—we become less partial, more sensitive to others who are increasingly distant from ourselves. Seen this way, a parent's acting to promote her own children's interests when she could be doing more to further the good of others, especially the good of others worse off than her children, seems to involve a failure of altruism.

And of course parents' concern for their children's well-being is not entirely selfless. On the whole, people have children because they want to, and believe—we think rightly—that doing so will make their own lives go better. Just three pages before his claim that “the project of having children can only be understood as a remarkably altruistic endeavor,” Thomas says, again we think rightly, that “parenting a child is generally seen as an extraordinarily marvelous experience.”⁴ If the project of parenting a child contributes to the value of one's own life, why isn't it properly conceived as furthering one's own interests rather than limiting their pursuit for the sake of others? There is certainly something distinctive about a project the content of which involves furthering the interests of other people—even where those others are one's own children. But if doing that also contributes to one's own well-being, then it takes on a doubly partial aspect: one is favoring particular others, with whom one has a particular relationship, rather than equally considering the interests of all; and favoring them makes one's own life go better—not better for others, better for oneself.

Together, these observations suggest that the altruism sometimes regarded as the core of “family values” acquires a genuinely moral character only when it transcends the family. For the Russian revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai, “the narrow and exclusive affection of the mother for her own children must expand until it extends to all the children of the great proletarian family. . . . In place of the individual and egoistic family, a great universal family of workers will develop, in which all the workers, men and women, will above all be comrades.”⁵ Indeed, the idea that the altruism and mutual concern characteristic of familial relationships could and should be extended to wider communities—to fellow citizens, perhaps to humankind as a whole—has played an influential role in egalitarian thinking, as has the suggestion that the family acts as an obstacle to progress by diverting people's energy and attention inward, into the private and away from the public sphere.⁶

We believe that “family values” can indeed serve to distract people from the more morally urgent claims of others. That distraction is all the more effective precisely because the family presents itself as a sphere of altruism. It is easy for parents to persuade themselves that their commitment to family life is not selfish—if they were selfish, they would be out having fun, not sitting at home reading their children bedtime stories. We have no problem with the idea that parents have special moral duties to their children, or that morality permits each of us to favor our own interests over those of others, including our interest in enjoying valuable familial relationships. But in a world where millions die every year for want of basic necessities, much apparently admirable parenting may better be thought of as a self-indulgent retreat, away from the true demands of morality—as, in Samuel Scheffler’s words, “the moral equivalent of a tax shelter.”⁷

How to balance one’s own interests, and those of people with whom one has particular kinds of special relationship, against the interests of others is an extremely difficult issue. For us, the kinds of partiality toward one’s children that are indeed justified by appeal to “family values” is a qualitative matter, separate from, and prior to, the quantitative question of the extent to which people may act to realize such values in their own, and their children’s, lives. Answers to that second question will be context-specific, depending crucially on the circumstances in which the individual finds herself. By the end of the book, we hope to have supplied the reader with a way of thinking about such matters. At this stage our task is more preliminary: to set out the various kinds of conflict between the value of equality and the value of those parent-child relationships that, for our purposes, constitute the family.

Distributive Equality and Relational Equality

We are treating equality here as a distributive ideal. Some who call themselves egalitarians think this is a mistake. Rather than distributions, these critics insist, social relations are the proper focus of egalitarian concern.⁸ Those sympathetic to so-called child liberationism might see this egalitarian hostility to relations of domination or oppression as an apt lens through which to view parent-child relationships.⁹ Just as whites, or men, have failed to relate as equals to people of color, or women, so, it is claimed, adults illegitimately treat children as inferior. By regarding children as lacking the capacities that would warrant treatment as independent and responsible agents, adults legitimize their own claim to authority and justify according children dependent and subordinate status

in the social and political order. True, from this perspective the fact that it is parents who are accorded rights over children is somewhat incidental. For the child liberationist, things are no better when children are rendered dependent on other adults, and some of the argument, for example on voting rights, is about the proper role of children within the political community and the wider society rather than within the family as such.¹⁰ But just as a key demand of the women's liberation movement required changes to the institution of marriage, so child liberationists often direct their attention to the rights held by children against their parents.

This egalitarian worry is intrafamilial, not interfamilial. It concerns not inequalities between families but inequalities within them. And what is objected to is not the distribution of any type of goods or benefits but the way that intrafamilial relationships are constructed and conducted. The problem is not that families confer unequal benefits and burdens on children raised by different parents. It is that families are sites of inequality that subject children to unjust forms of subordination, domination, and oppression.

We agree that children are often illegitimately subject to the authority of parents; parents do not properly have many of the rights to control their children's lives that they are currently granted. Parents' rights are considerably more limited than is commonly believed, and are conditional on parents' meeting children's interests—including their interest in developing their capacity to become autonomous agents—to a high degree. So we are happy to think of our theory as doing for children what feminist philosophers have done for women. Where feminists reject patriarchy, we reject "parentarchy."

That said, it is obviously sometimes in children's interests to have their lives controlled by adults, in complicated, age-dependent and sphere-of-discretion-dependent ways. What children should be free to decide for themselves will depend on their emotional, physical, and intellectual maturity. Nobody thinks that very young children should be deciding for themselves what to eat, where to cross the road, and the like. But as children get older, the kind of authority over them that is justified changes. One learns autonomy in large part by practicing it, so the duty to help children develop the capacity for autonomy implies careful judgments about when children are ready to start making their own choices, and gradually increasing their discretion over their own lives.

Two further claims may be more interesting. First, we follow so-called child-centered justifications of the family in claiming that it is valuable for children not merely that adults have the authority to decide some matters about what happens to and for children but that the adults in question be those children's parents (rather than, for example, state functionaries working in child-rearing

institutions). More distinctively, our approach emphasizes the importance for the child's development of her having a relationship with the parent in which the parent is experienced as authoritative, as making her own judgments (rather than, say, carrying out orders from an official, directive, child-rearing manual). So we defend not merely authority over children but the (limitedly, conditionally) authoritative family. Second, and more controversially, we argue that exercising authoritative control over children's lives is something that it is in adults' interests to do. So we defend the (limitedly, conditionally) authoritative family partly because it is a good institution for those who get to exercise the authority within it. This second thought puts us quite sharply at odds with child liberationists, who tend to focus exclusively on the interests of children.

More generally, we deny the strong version of the relational egalitarian position which claims that distributions matter only if they impact on social relationships. The fact that people's lives are equally important has distributive implications—implications about the distribution of opportunities to flourish or to be authors of their own lives—that go beyond the impact of those distributions on social relationships. To soften the contrast between “relational” and “distributive” approaches, we can frame our insistence on the distinct importance of distributions in ways congenial to the relational egalitarian: for us, a society that permits unjustified or illegitimate inequalities between its members *just is* one whose members are not treating one another, relating to one another, as equals. The distributions themselves *express* inequalitarian relationships. To live with others in an unequal society on terms that cannot be justified to those who have less is not merely a distributive failure; it is also a failure of relationship.¹¹

The Family versus Fair Equality of Opportunity

Families are a problem even for a rather mainstream version of the egalitarian ideal. One does not have to favor anything as far-fetched and widely discredited as equality of outcome to be concerned about the unequalizing influence of family background. Nor does one have to appeal to a particularly demanding or controversial conception of equality of opportunity.¹² Families impact on children's opportunities, not merely on their outcomes, and the fact that children are raised in families undermines even a widely shared conception of equality of opportunity: the idea that children's prospects in life should depend on their own merits rather than on their social origins. This view derives much of its appeal from the idea of a fair competition; the thought is that outcome

inequalities can be fully justified only if they result from fair procedures, procedures that do not allow (what should be) irrelevant factors to influence how people fare or where they end up. Modern industrial societies are structured so that socially produced rewards—income, wealth, status, positions in the occupational structure, and the opportunities for self-exploration and fulfillment that come with them—are distributed extremely unequally, and people compete with one another to secure more rather than less of them. To be legitimate, that competition must be conducted on fair terms, not skewed in favor of those born to advantage. In the familiar metaphor, the playing field should be level, which means that children with the same abilities, and willingness to use them, should enjoy the same chances of success, irrespective of their family background.

That condition is not satisfied simply by the formal requirement—represented in UK law by what has become known as “Equal Opportunities” legislation—that jobs and the rewards that accompany them go to those best qualified to carry them out. We know, of course, that recruitment practices often fail to meet even that less demanding standard. A person’s race, gender, religion, and, sometimes, class background can all influence her chance of success in the labor market in ways that violate even the idea of “careers open to talents.”¹³ But fair equality of opportunity requires more than that the similarly qualified are treated equally, more than that people get jobs on the basis of what we might call their “relevant competences.” It demands also that children born into different families have the same opportunities to develop qualifications and competences in the first place. As Rawls puts it, fair equality of opportunity requires “not merely that public offices and social positions be open in the formal sense, but that all should have a fair chance to attain them. To specify the idea of a fair chance we say: supposing that there is a distribution of native endowments, those who have the same level of talent and ability and the same willingness to use these gifts should have the same prospects of success regardless of their social class of origin.”¹⁴

Which is where the problems start. The idea of fair equality of opportunity is curiously ambivalent. On the one hand, when compared with more radically egalitarian visions of social justice, it can seem somewhat conservative, apparently serving to legitimate a fundamentally inegalitarian and competitive economic system. There will inevitably be winners and losers, it suggests, and the only kind of equality to be pursued is that needed to make sure the right people win (and the “wrong” people lose).¹⁵ It has appeal, moreover, to those with no deep interest in equality whatsoever, since it can be seen rather as a means to economic efficiency. An optimally productive society will not waste

the economic potential of any of its members. That potential is best realized by our ensuring that all have equal opportunity, first to acquire useful skills and knowledge, and then to deploy them in the carrying out of appropriate occupational tasks. Inequalities of opportunity, from this perspective, distort not the fair distribution of rewards to people, but the efficient allocation of people to jobs.¹⁶ Much of the popular appeal of fair equality of opportunity, we suspect, derives from its apparent compatibility with other dominant values—inequality, competition, efficiency—and the way in which it seems not to challenge fundamentally the organizing principles of our contemporary affluent Western societies.

On the other hand, taken seriously it is extremely radical. So radical, indeed, that it rarely is taken seriously. A moment's reflection on the myriad ways in which a child's prospects are influenced by her familial circumstances suggests that the vision of a society in which children born to different families enjoy the same opportunities to develop marketable competences and qualifications can only be a chimera. Children of wealthy parents will have access to high-quality schooling, food, health care, housing, and holidays that are bound to foster their development in ways not available to children born into poverty. Suppose we eliminated economic inequalities between parents, or somehow insulated children's developmental opportunities from their influence. Different parents would still be members of different social networks; their friends and colleagues would be different—and unequally valuable as contacts, or sources of information, that could be used to help their children in the competition for jobs and the qualifications helpful to their achievement. Get rid of that cause of inequality in opportunities and parents will still be unequally informed about the choices available to their children and which of them are the best means to their success. And information of that kind will be just a small part of the cultural capital that parents will remain able to convert into competitive advantage for their children—whether intentionally or inadvertently—as the unintended by-product of apparently innocuous interactions like bedtime stories and talk at family meals. Moreover, parents with the same economic and cultural capital, and similar networks, may simply make different choices about what to do with them: some may regard promoting their children's interests as their major life project; others may prefer to spend their time and energy on other things. All of these are mechanisms by which families interrupt, or disrupt, fair equality of opportunity.

So despite its competitive aspect, and its *prima facie* endorsement of inequalities of outcome that result from fair competition, fair equality of opportunity turns out to be thoroughly subversive. Parents' "outcomes"—how they

fare in the competition for jobs and rewards attaching to those jobs—are intimately connected to their children’s “opportunities”: their prospects for success (or failure) in that competition. (We will discuss later the idea that outcomes for parents just *are* opportunities for their children.) Fully to realize fair equality of opportunity would require drastic measures. Either we would have to eliminate all the relevant inequalities between parents, in which case we’d need equality of outcome with respect to all the things that are helpful to children’s development. Or we would have to eliminate all the mechanisms by which inequalities between parents generate unequal developmental opportunities for children. Since those mechanisms extend to the very core of the parent-child relationship, the latter seems to imply the abolition of the family itself as the social institution in which children are raised.

We have a good deal to say about the “abolish relevant inequalities between parents” route, but we don’t have anything *new* to say about it. To maintain focus, we will simply put the more general arguments for and against permitting or welcoming certain kinds of inequality between parents to one side. Suppose we did somehow succeed in establishing genuinely fair equality of opportunity between the members of one generation. Legitimate processes—mechanisms and interactions that it would be wrong to prevent—and distributive outcomes of those processes that allow people to take responsibility for their own choices (and not other peoples’) would lead to inequalities of outcome.¹⁷ Parents must have some freedom to make their own choices, in line with their own preferences, even though that means that they will end up with somewhat unequal amounts of the various resources—money, education, information, contacts, time—helpful to their children’s development. (We say “*some* freedom” and “*somewhat* unequal amounts” because our all-things-considered judgments grant individuals much less freedom, and justify much less unequal outcomes, than are currently accepted.)

Parents’ Unequal Outcomes and Children’s Unequal Opportunities

We will concentrate instead on the second drastic strategy: eliminating the mechanisms by which inequalities and differences between parents turn into unequal developmental opportunities for children. We will argue that parents are currently allowed to do too much for their children, and in too many ways. Our societies not only permit unjustifiable inequalities between parents; they also grant parents unjustifiable means of converting their own resources into

superior prospects for their children. In effect, then, children of disadvantaged parents suffer a double burden, relative to their more advantaged peers: they are competing against children of parents who (a) have access to illegitimately more resources, which (b) they can use to promote their children's interests by illegitimate means. But, just as we do not object to all resource inequalities between parents, so we accept some of the mechanisms by which parents may convert resource advantages into superior opportunities for their children.

That is partly because we understand “resources” broadly. It's tempting to focus on parents' using their wealth to purchase developmental opportunities for their children. It is certainly easy to conceive many ways in which parents' market power is likely to affect their children's development through differential access to better housing and schooling, computers and books at home, mind-broadening holidays, and so on. All of these do indeed happen and all of them disrupt fair equality of opportunity. But recent research suggests that these mechanisms are actually less important explanations of why children raised in different families fare unequally well. It looks as if personality variables, preferences and choices that can be thought of as aspects or expressions of people's identities, and the kinds of cultural capital (or its absence) that result in large part from childhood socialization within the family, are more important. The correlation between parents' and children's economic position results in large part from the transmission, from parents to children, of those characteristics that were conducive to parents' own success (or lack of it) rather than from parents' own economic resources (or lack of them) in procuring (or failing to procure) developmental opportunities for children.¹⁸ The important “resources” that different parents unequally bring to parenting should, it seems, be conceived as features of parents themselves—what they know, how they behave, what they are like—rather than as the material assets at their disposal.

Moreover, not all the *differences* between parents that turn into unequal opportunities for children can properly be conceived as *inequalities*. Some inequalities of opportunity between children arise not because parents have unequal resources available to them but because parents make different choices about what to do with their resources. Children's prospects depend not only on what their parents *can* do for them, but also on what those parents *want* to do for them.

On the one hand, different parents may simply weigh the promotion of their children's interests differently, relative to the other things they care about. Few parents, however loving, regard their children's well-being as the *only* thing that matters in their lives. Some will devote themselves to good causes (Charles Dickens's Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House* comes to mind).¹⁹ Some will

devote themselves to themselves—to their own professional advancement, or intellectual output, or watching TV. Although parents surely bear onerous responsibilities, they are not morally required to subordinate their own to their children's interests entirely. Variation in the extent to which parents seek to promote their children's interests may lead to children's enjoying (or suffering) unequal opportunities—even when compared to other children whose parents have the same resources at their disposal.

On the other hand, and more importantly, different parents will have different views about what their children's interests *are*. We don't mean simply that different parents will disagree about how best to further their children's prospects of success in the competition for income and status, though that is surely the case. If they agree on the goal, then differences in judgments about how best to achieve it might better be conceived as inequalities in the resources they bring to parenting than as a difference in their preferences. Rather, different parents will disagree about what it *is* for their children's lives to go well. Some may care above all that their children grow up to be devout worshippers of the deity the parents themselves worship; some may encourage their children to eschew the rat race and material success and live a life of abstemious simplicity. The principle we have been discussing requires that, irrespective of their family background, children with the same abilities and willingness to use them should enjoy the same chances of success in the competition for income, wealth, status, positions in the occupational structure, and the opportunities for self-realization and fulfillment that come with them. Parents' different understandings of what would count as success for their children may influence their children's prospects in those terms.

In any case, the conflict between the family and fair equality of opportunity runs deeper than many progressives have wanted to believe. If children's developmental opportunities depended on their parents' economic resources, so that economic (dis)advantage were transmitted from parents to children via the deployment of parents' differential market power, then one could envisage seriously mitigating (if not altogether eliminating) that transmission through tax-transfer policies. For example, state schooling policies might be designed to disconnect the quality of children's education from parents' income, thereby helping to insulate children's opportunities from excessive influence by their parents' outcomes. But that kind of approach does not get to the heart of the problem. The inequalities between children, as far as their developmental opportunities are concerned, stem from processes more central to—one might say constitutive of—family life than egalitarians might have hoped. It seems to be the informal interactions—the bedtime stories, the talk at table, the family

culture, the parenting styles, the inculcation of attitudes and values (some conscious, some unconscious)—that make much of the difference to children's prospects.

This suggests that the only way really to deliver fair equality of opportunity would be to get rid of parent-child relationships—to abolish the family—together. Like everybody else, we think that would drastically misjudge the weight of the various considerations at stake. Intimate, loving parent-child relationships are hugely valuable—for both children and parents. They are vital for children's cognitive, moral, and emotional development, so are essential for children's well-being when they reach adulthood, but, of course, they also contribute hugely to children's well-being as children. For many adults, those relationships are vital sources of joy, self-realization, and flourishing. Simply put, it's more important that human beings get to enjoy such relationships than that they get a level playing field on which to compete for jobs, money, and status.

That is obvious as well as simple. But clarifying the nature of the conflict between the family and fair equality of opportunity is worthwhile, even if finding in favor of the former is hardly controversial. For nothing we have said rules out policies intended to make the distribution of opportunities more equal between those born to less or more advantaged parents. There remain strategies that leave families intact and seek to mitigate, neutralize, or compensate for their unequalizing effects. Careful explication of the various mechanisms currently producing those effects helps us to identify precisely which aspects of the family are indeed worthy of protection and which are not so important. We have suggested that the moral significance of the family rests on the intimate relationship between parents and children. That suggestion gives us a way of thinking systematically about the kinds of parent-child interaction that should and need not be respected by policy, or engaged in by parents, in particular circumstances. That suggestion will be developed in part 3.

Is Fair Equality of Opportunity Fair?

In the next section we will explore our rather cryptic observation that, for many, parents' outcomes are children's opportunities. Here we consider the somewhat unsettling implications of the empirical findings just discussed for the way we think about the principle of fair equality of opportunity. We presented that principle in Rawls's formulation, as requiring that those with the same abilities and willingness to use them should enjoy the same chances of success, irrespective of their family's social class. What offends fair equality of

opportunity is that family background tilts the playing field between children with similar levels of ability and motivation, by providing them with unequal developmental opportunities. But what about the fact that family background itself *causes* inequalities in abilities and motivations? It looks as if fair equality of opportunity has no objection to what, it now seems, is actually the main kind of mechanism by which parents influence their children's prospects. If successful parents tend to raise more able and better-motivated children than disadvantaged parents do, and *that* explains why children tend to end up in the same kind of position in the distribution of income and status as their parents, then fair equality of opportunity seems to be satisfied.

Let's be clear where the problem lies. We should not think of abilities, in this context, as *developed* abilities. Wealthy or educated parents are better placed than poor or uneducated ones to develop their children's abilities, but that inequality in developmental opportunities is precisely what fair equality of opportunity condemns. "Ability," here, means "native ability" or "natural talent."²⁰ Though the idea that children are born with different levels of "natural talent" has to be handled with great care,²¹ its emphasis on what people are born with—or born as—has the merit of directing our attention to the social processes by which whatever that is gets developed into relevant competences. Those developed "abilities" valued by labor markets are to a very great extent endogenous, the outcome of social interactions, rather than exogenous, or simply "given" prior to those interactions. Fair equality of opportunity is disrupted when children's family backgrounds are allowed unequally to influence the development of natural talents into relevant competences.

The problem is with the second half of the formulation, the bit about motivation. It is easy to see its appeal. People have equal opportunity to get (or become) something when they are equally able to get (or become) it *if they try*. Where one person is simply not willing to make the same effort as another, to achieve something she is no less able to achieve, then what she lacks is not equal opportunity but equal motivation. One reason to focus our distributive attention on opportunities rather than outcomes is precisely that we want people to be responsible for how they fare. That is why fair equality of opportunity fits so neatly with the idea of reward according to desert. If those born with the same natural talents have the same opportunities to develop those talents into marketable skills, we can regard any inequalities in their outcomes as deserved—in the sense that they will result from their own choices about how hard to work to develop those talents.

Except, of course, that children's choices, their capacity to make an effort as well as what they choose to exert their effort on, are substantially a function

of their upbringing. How hard they work to develop whatever “native endowments” they are born with depends hugely on how they are raised. As Rawls says, “the internal life and culture of the family influence, perhaps as much as anything else, a child’s motivation and his capacity to gain from education.”²² Suppose that two genetically identical twins, born in the same hospital on the same day but adopted by different parents, go on to enjoy (or suffer) very unequal prospects, and very different lives, simply because of the less or more effort-encouraging familial cultures they will meet when they get home. One is adopted by conscientious, emotionally mature, reliable parents who instill in him valuable character traits such as self-discipline, perseverance in the face of adversity, and the ability to defer gratification. The other is adopted by parents who have never acquired those traits themselves and so lack the capacity to inculcate them. Suppose that adoption by the second couple would be better for either child than any alternative feasible option. We may judge that, all things considered, this inequality in prospects would be acceptable. But it is hard to think that there is nothing unfair about it. What seems to be unfair is precisely that the two children are not going to have equal opportunities in life.

Why object to the ways in which children’s different family backgrounds create inequalities in their developmental opportunities—their chances of developing their natural talents into relevant competences—while not objecting to the ways in which those family backgrounds create inequalities in their motivations or willingness to exert effort? Surely one of the main ways by which different sets of parents tend to produce children with less or more marketable skills is precisely by instilling in them a willingness to do what it takes—to make the effort—to acquire those skills. Even more fundamentally, perhaps, these motivational and character traits are themselves marketable skills. Punctuality, self-discipline, and perseverance in the face of difficulty are precisely the kind of attributes that employers look for and lenders expect of those wishing to start their own businesses.

There is something very odd about a principle that condemns inequalities in the developmental opportunities enjoyed by children raised in different families but confines its concern to those who are similarly motivated or willing to make an effort. That is odd partly because motivational factors so strongly influence the extent to which children develop their “native endowments”: being raised by parents who teach one habits conducive to success in the labor market *is* a developmental opportunity. But it’s odd also because such factors are themselves among the attributes that are rewarded in competitive market economies.

Parents' Outcomes Are Children's Opportunities?

We introduced the idea of equality of opportunity as a somewhat commonsensical and conventional conception of equality, by contrast with the implausibly restrictive idea of equality of outcome. Nonetheless, interrogating what would be required for the realization even of that apparently modest egalitarian goal suggests that it would be wrong for a society to pursue it wholeheartedly. Parents' outcomes are so closely related to children's opportunities that the only way to realize equality of opportunity would be either (a) to deny parents the opportunity to acquire unequal amounts of the wide range of "resources" relevant to children's opportunities or (b) to block all the mechanisms by which those resources might influence children's prospects. Neither strategy can be justified all things considered. We might want to pursue both strategies to some extent—perhaps to a far greater extent than we do at present—but we must accept some disruption of fair equality of opportunity if we are to allow parents and children to enjoy the goods of family life.

This way of setting out the issues, however, misses something important, something that renders the goal of fair equality of opportunity—indeed many variants of equality of opportunity—problematic or suspect in a more fundamental way. So far, the problem has been simply that parents' outcomes are important causes of children's opportunities. That is why the second strategy—preventing parents' resources from influencing children's opportunities—is conceptually coherent. We may not want to pursue it all the way but at least that strategy makes conceptual sense. A deeper worry is that children's opportunities should *count as* parents' outcomes—that parents' outcomes *include* children's opportunities. If so, then allowing parents to achieve that kind of unequal outcome just is to allow their children to enjoy unequal opportunities. And preventing them from promoting their children's prospects just is to deny them that kind of outcome.

Think about what people are trying to achieve when they seek well-rewarded positions in the occupational structure. In the most general terms we could say that they are after better rather than worse lives—they want their lives to go well and they believe that achieving those positions will help with that. But of course they do not, typically, seek better lives only for themselves; they seek them also for their loved ones, including—often most importantly—their children. And, again of course, they do not want those rewards only so that their children can benefit in childhood, while those children are at home or dependent on the parents. They want them also so that they can help to promote their children's

well-being in the future. As we discussed earlier, children's well-being is, for many parents, a crucial component of their own well-being. Certainly that is a goal for which they exert effort and make sacrifices, and a goal that provides a guiding orientation for many of their most important decisions. Their children's having the opportunity for a better life than they would otherwise have is an outcome—perhaps, for some, *the* outcome—for which they are striving. Preventing parents from using their resources to promote their children's interests would be to deprive them of the very outcome they had worked to achieve.

So it's not simply that parental resource outcomes are causally related to children's opportunities in ways that are morally valuable enough to make us judge it important to leave at least some of them intact. The problem with fair equality of opportunity is not the causal interrelatedness between parents and children so much as deep interconnections at the level of what it means for a person's life to go well. In part, what it *is* for one parent to be better off than another is precisely for her to be better able to promote her children's interests. The only way to give children a fair chance in life is to deny adults the opportunity to achieve—or fail to achieve—what many will regard as a crucial component of their well-being. What many want the opportunity *to do* is precisely to benefit their children, in large part by developing their abilities in such a way that they are well equipped for the competitive processes that distribute important goods. But the extent that we allow people to do that is the extent to which we fail to provide all with a fair chance. It looks as if fair equality of opportunity is conceptually coherent for only a single generation.

Parents have an interest in promoting their children's well-being, but they also have an interest in getting a fair chance to do that. Where two parents did not themselves enjoy fair equality of opportunity as children, promoting *their* children's interests will itself be among the things they lacked equal opportunity to do. Faced with this deep tension, all we can do is seek a considered way of balancing the different interests at stake, forming careful all-things-considered judgments about how to weigh them against each other. This is hard. To highlight just one complication, the very fact that advantaged parents are able to promote their children's well-being obstructs the ability of disadvantaged parents to promote theirs. Because competitive advantage is so important for the distribution of good things in our societies, it is harder for poor parents to benefit their children if rich parents are allowed to benefit theirs. So disadvantaged parents, no less concerned to promote their children's interests than advantaged parents are, can appeal to that shared concern itself as a reason to restrict the means by which parents may act on it.

Beyond Fair Equality of Opportunity?

So far we have discussed the conflict between family values and equality of opportunity by focusing on a specific version of the latter. The family, we have emphasized, is a problem even for a rather conventional or mainstream conception of that ideal. This section broadens the discussion more thoroughly, widening our horizons to raise more fundamental questions about that conception and the concept of equality of opportunity in general.

Notice, first, that the principle we have been considering is concerned only that people with similar levels of talent and motivation should enjoy equal opportunities. It is thus entirely silent on the question of how opportunities should be distributed between people with *dissimilar* levels of talent and motivation. Some problems with the motivational aspect have been touched on, but what about the other aspect, the focus on people with similar levels of talent? We explained earlier that this should be understood to refer to features that people are born with (their “natural endowments”), and mentioned some doubts about this approach. But suppose we put our suspicion to one side, at least to the extent of allowing that different people are born with somewhat different potentials to develop abilities and capacities likely to be rewarded by labor markets. The question then is this: why is it so important that people with similar levels of natural potential should have equal opportunities and, apparently, not at all important that people with *different* levels should have them?

Think again of two babies born in the same hospital on the same day. The previous example made them genetically identical because we wanted to hone in on the differing effects that family background can have on people’s motivation. Now imagine babies—make them twins again if you like—who are genetically different: one born with a good deal of potential to develop characteristics valued by labor markets, another born with very little. Fair equality of opportunity has no objection to the idea that those two will enjoy (or suffer) unequal prospects. Many readers will agree.

Equality of opportunity is concerned to equalize people’s circumstances—in particular, their developmental opportunities. It does not require us to eliminate inequalities in prospects that are due to differences constitutive of who those people are. It demands only the removal of the social barriers and silver spoons that prevent people from competing on level terms with those constituted like them. This fits with the idea that people can deserve unequal rewards for the exercise of their different constitutions.²³ It’s problematic, on this account, if parents provide their children with unequal developmental opportunities, but not if they provide them, via the inheritance of genetic character-

istics, with unequal potentials to be developed. The former refers to extrinsic things, circumstances that affect how well off children are likely to be. The latter seem more intrinsic: change those and what you have are different *children*.

A more radical conception of equality of opportunity would wonder why we should think of people's circumstances and their constitutions so differently. Some people will surely regard their genetic constitutions—their natural endowments (or lack of them)—as regrettable circumstances rather than as a constitutive part of their personhood. And even if others, perhaps more fortunate in the natural lottery, do view their own natural endowments as a crucial part of what makes them who they are, it's not obviously fair that their good fortune should give them superior prospects to those not so lucky. A concern with the distribution of opportunities, rather than outcomes, reflects the idea that it's fair for people to bear the consequences of their responsible choices. If so, and if people are not responsible for their genetic makeup (or "constitution"), then restricting one's conception of equality of opportunity to the similarly constituted can start to seem rather blinkered. Why not hold that *all* people, however constituted, should have the same opportunities?

Perhaps the answer to that question depends on what it is that we want people to have equal opportunities *for*.²⁴ We introduced fair equality of opportunity as concerned with the competition for jobs, or what social scientists call positions in the occupational structure. That's because jobs are the main ways in which our societies distribute many important goods. When we think about jobs directly, it may seem right to limit the idea of equality of opportunity to the similarly constituted. It would be odd to want those born with a tin ear to have the same chance of becoming a concert pianist as the child prodigy. But that might be because we are factoring in efficiency or productivity considerations rather than limiting ourselves to fairness alone. As we noted, fair equality of opportunity is appealing partly because it seems to combine two distinct ideas: inequalities of opportunity distort both the fair distribution of rewards to people and the efficient allocation of people to jobs. Clearly, given the nature of the activities involved, it would be inefficient to organize society so that all had the same prospect of becoming a CEO or brain surgeon (or an office cleaner or supermarket cashier), whatever their natural endowments. But that doesn't show that it is fair for differently endowed people to have unequal chances of achieving the rewards that currently attach to those jobs.

Rather than thinking in terms of the distribution of opportunities for certain kinds of job, which encourages a confounding of fairness and efficiency considerations, we should focus on the benefits (and disbenefits) that those jobs bring to those who do them. "Jobs," or "occupations," turns out to be short-

hand for a wide range of goods (and bads): money, status, safety, interestingness, demandingness, degree of self-realization.²⁵ With jobs understood as constellations of a number of different forms of advantage (and disadvantage), limiting our concern to equality of opportunity between the similarly talented looks less satisfactory. Maybe the talented and the untalented should not have the same prospect of becoming a brain surgeon or a CEO, but does that mean they shouldn't have the same prospect of enjoying the various good and bad things that societies like ours distribute via those occupational positions? From a distributive perspective, it's unclear why we should care about equality of opportunity only between the similarly constituted. Is it fair, for example, that those born with disabilities should have worse prospects, for those aspects of well-being, than others?

We could go further and query such an emphasis on jobs at all. It's true that societies distribute important components of well-being through the occupational structure. But it's not the only way those components get distributed. Why not care about the fair distribution of opportunities for all the things that make people's lives go better or worse? Focusing on jobs (and on the distribution of opportunities to achieve them) makes sense if we want an easily identifiable, readily operationalized, indicator of people's general standing in the distribution of socially distributed rewards (and of the opportunities to acquire them). But from a philosophical perspective it makes sense to broaden our concern to compass other dimensions of well-being too. If, as we believe, familial relationships are, for many, among the most important elements of human well-being, then presumably we should be interested in equality of opportunity to achieve *those*.

Rather than conceive the family as an obstacle to the realization of equality of opportunity, which is how it is commonly regarded, and how we have treated it so far, we could think of familial relationship goods as themselves among the things that people should have equal opportunity *for*. This opens up a whole new agenda. In what ways does our society influence the distribution of opportunities for healthy, loving familial relationships? What can be done to make that distribution fairer? There will still be a conflict with the family, but now the questions will be why, when, how, and to what extent parents should be permitted to favor themselves, and members of their family, when they could be helping others to realize the goods of family life. And, since we are talking now about intimate, affective, personal relationships, there are of course important questions about the role that social policy and political action may properly play in pursuit of a fairer distribution. What may the state legitimately do as regards people's personal lives? What may it do without counterproductivity;

without, that is, interfering with relationships in such a way as to deprive them of the very qualities that make them so valuable?

We have been leaving unchallenged an unspoken assumption about the people whose equal opportunities we might care about—that they are members of the same society. It's been implicit in our discussion so far that the principle of equality of opportunity applies to people who are living under the same social arrangements, who are participants in what Rawls calls a system of social cooperation. Nothing we have actually said warrants that assumption, but so strong is its grip as the default view that we doubt that many readers will have been thinking about the desirability of fair equality of opportunity as between all human beings throughout the world. It's worth wondering why we should think it unfair if children born to different families in the same society have unequal prospects while not similarly objecting to inequalities of opportunity between those born to different families in different societies.

The answer might depend on what the opportunities are for. One might think, for example, that when the issue is the distribution of jobs, it makes some sense to be interested particularly in fair chances as between children born into the society in which those jobs are held—though even that suggests a rather unrealistic and outdated picture, as if those jobs were not the object of global competition. But if, in good philosophical fashion, we abstract to generic “well-being,” then it becomes harder to justify the parochial idea that equality of opportunity between one's fellow citizens matters, while the distribution of opportunities to live a good life, as between them and those born elsewhere, does not. Here, again, there will be important questions about the proper role of politics, about the state as the appropriate agent for the pursuit of our distributive ideals, and about what those ideals should be once we broaden our horizons beyond particular societies or political communities. Some philosophers believe that the state has a particular role to play in promoting distributive justice among its citizens, while it is simply not its job to pursue that goal on a wider scale; some that the idea of distributive justice does not apply on the global scale at all; some that it does but not in a way that involves claims about equality of opportunity.²⁶ Engaging with these issues would make this a very different book. Still, we want to alert the reader to, and our more detailed analyses in subsequent chapters will deliberately leave open, the possibility that, at the foundational level, our distributive concerns should extend, and perhaps extend equally, to all human beings, irrespective of the state or society into which they are born.

So far we have been discussing different specifications of the general idea of equality of opportunity. But one might wonder why our distributive concerns should be couched in terms of *equality* of opportunity at all. Equality of op-

portunity has most intuitive appeal in competitive contexts.²⁷ Think about the proverbial level playing field in its literal, sporting use. We want that field to be level because two teams are competing for the same prize. If one wins, the other loses; so anything that benefits one team simultaneously disadvantages the other. If one team is playing downhill, the other is playing uphill. That's not fair (unless they change ends at halftime), and it's not fair in a way that is harmful for one of the competitors. The same applies to equality of opportunity as usually conceived as a distributive ideal for a society. If some children are born into families that give them a head start in the competition for interesting or well-rewarded jobs, then those not so fortunate are not simply worse off than the lucky ones; they are worse off than they would be if all had equal chances. The fact that some have better opportunities is actively harmful to the rest—it reduces their opportunities. That's because, at any given time, there are only so many interesting and well-rewarded jobs to go round. So equalizing opportunities is actually *improving* some people's opportunities; it's improving the opportunities of those who would otherwise have less.

All things considered, we may end up sacrificing some equality of opportunity for the sake of other values—including family values. But our reluctance to do that derives mainly from the realization that we are thereby condemning some people to worse opportunities for jobs and their associated rewards than they would have had under equality of opportunity. But, once we are thinking about opportunities for well-being, then we seem no longer to be assuming a competitive or zero-sum context. Does your having more opportunity for well-being than I do harm me? It does if we assume that you and I are competing for a given stock of well-being, in the way that we tend to assume that children in the same age cohort are competing with each other for a given number of interesting and well-rewarded jobs or places at good universities. In that case your gain would be my loss, and we would indeed be in a zero-sum situation. But there's no reason generally to think of well-being in that way, in which case the idea that equality of opportunity is what matters loses much, some would say all, of its appeal.

To value people's having equal amounts of something, or equal opportunities for that thing, when the total amount is not fixed, is to value equality even when equality brings no benefit anybody. That seems bizarre.²⁸ Wanting to “level down”—to deny advantages to some people just because others cannot enjoy them too—looks more like envy than morality, a sin rather than a virtue. Better, it seems, to reject equality, strictly understood, and to endorse a different distributive ideal; perhaps a variant of the “prioritarian” idea that, when assessing the value of distributions, we should give priority to the claims of the

worse off. The thought that we should care particularly about the prospects of those who have least seems to fit our intuitive views in lots of cases. It does not support leveling down (because by definition that won't help the worse off), but it does support equality in those contexts where a more equal distribution will benefit those on the wrong end of an inequality. That is why some philosophers have argued that those who think of themselves as "egalitarian" do not, in fact, and strictly speaking, favor *equality*. Rather, they value distributions that give proper weight to the interests of the disadvantaged. Sometimes those distributions will be equal; sometimes they won't.²⁹

There is, of course, a good deal more to be said. While accepting the case against leveling down, we must bear in mind how many kinds of inequality of opportunity have adverse effects on those with less. If many goods have positional value, in that their value to their possessor derives in part from how much she has relative to others, then there will be many goods where making opportunities more equal will not in fact be leveling down at all. Some goods, like education, are manifestly positional. The competitive context makes it obvious that some parents' buying their children a superior education harms the prospects of others. Other goods we might call latently positional. Health care might seem different from education—it's not obvious how one child's being healthier than another is bad for the latter. But in fact the relation between health and educational achievement means that, in raising your child on a good diet and ensuring that she gets proper exercise, you are damaging the competitive chances of less healthy children. That's not to say you act wrongly when you raise your child to be healthy. All things considered, that is surely the right thing to do. Nonetheless, when we are dealing with positional goods, the case against preventing parents from conferring superior opportunities on their children need not be perverse or envious. We'd be *leveling*, but not *leveling down*.³⁰

Many goods have a positional aspect, but few are entirely positional. There is also, nearly always, benefit to having more rather than less in absolute terms, not simply to having more rather than less relative to others. So we must also keep in mind whether the good we are concerned with is in fixed supply, so that people's opportunities for those goods are competitive or zero-sum, or whether it is capable of increase. Even if the supply of jobs, and associated rewards, is fixed at any particular point in time, over time it is far from fixed, so there is plenty of room for unequal distributions of opportunities that benefit the worse off. Your raising your children to be educated and healthy may indeed damage the competitive chances of some other children. But if yours go on to increase the total number of good things in the world—perhaps, in particular, the number of interesting and well-rewarded jobs—and some of those good

things benefit those other children, then it looks as if we have a prioritarian case for permitting the inequality. It might seem odd to object to parents' conferring advantage on their children in ways that give their children unfair advantages over others if their doing so tends, over time, to improve the opportunities available to the less advantaged.

Conclusion

With this last suggestion, we have now offered two reasons not to pursue fair equality of opportunity all the way. On the one hand, we must be prepared for children of similar talent and ability raised by different parents to enjoy somewhat unfairly unequal prospects of achieving the rewards attached to different jobs, since the alternative would cost too much in terms of familial relationship goods. On the other hand, some unfairness in the distribution of those prospects could be beneficial for those who have unfairly less. In both cases, then, there are conflicts between fair equality of opportunity and other values.

Where an all-things-considered judgment means that a value or principle is not to be fully realized, we think it important not to obscure that fact. (This is, of course, the standard case. It is rare for one so thoroughly to outweigh the other that it simply trumps it, achieving what Rawls calls "lexical priority.") The alternative, advocated by some (most notably Ronald Dworkin), is to allow conflicts to shape the very way that we understand the conflicting elements themselves.³¹ "Fair equality of opportunity," on that kind of view, might mean "the kind of equality of opportunity that we should value, having taken into account the other values at stake." On this approach, one should aim for a way of conceiving values or principles that allows them to form a coherent and systematic set, eliminating conflicts in the very process of conceptualization and labeling. It's true that this is closer to the commonsensical or conventional way of dealing with the problem. In conventional political discourse, especially for politicians but also for the rest of us when we are thinking about political choices, it's problematic to allow or acknowledge incompatibilities, to accept that all good things can't always go together. So there is an understandable tendency to allow one's appreciation of the inevitable conflicts between values or principles to influence the way one conceives those values or principles themselves. But this often becomes unhelpful fudging. Better to keep clearly in mind the values or principles at stake, accept that they will indeed conflict, and be honest enough, with ourselves and others, to acknowledge that all-things-

considered judgments are going to involve a balancing act, and hence the incomplete realization of any one.

That said, if we can present a position that can be justified to all, in the sense that it gets the balance of values right, then there is an important, quite different, sense in which that outcome will be fair. It will not fully realize fair equality of opportunity, so for particular real people, even the right balance will be unfair in its effects. But, if we get the balancing judgment right, all things considered, we can still defend those effects as “fair” in a broader sense: all relevant interests will have been factored in and accorded their proper weight. Abstracting from the particularities of their own situation, thinking about the interests and values at stake from a disinterested perspective, people would have chosen the proposed balance. In that sense, the judgment, and its implications for particular individuals, would be fair. And, because we will be able to offer that kind of justification of the distributive inequalities, our relationships with one another will have an egalitarian cast—they will be justifiable to us as equals.

The idea of fairness invoked here sees it not as one value to be weighed against others but as itself concerned with all-things-considered judgments. While it is important to keep clear on how our preferred balance of values will not guarantee children fair equality of opportunity (our first point), this perspective has the great merit of focusing our attention on what balancings of values really *can* be justified to those affected by them, especially to those who fare badly under them. It thus demands precise specification of the different domains of value at stake and careful consideration of the ways in which they conflict, and of how we should weigh them when and where they do. We need to know which of the mechanisms that currently disrupt fair equality of opportunity are worthy of protection despite their disruptive tendencies. Only with those—and only those—mechanisms protected, would we be able to justify the unfair inequality of opportunities to those on the wrong end of them. And only then would we enjoy the kind of justificatory relationship expressive of our fundamental equality.

