



Against Equality of Opportunity

Matt Cavanagh

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, 223pp.

ISBN: 0 199 2434 33.

Contemporary Political Theory (2003) **2**, 131–133. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300060

When asked how society might be made a fairer place, and in particular what principles should govern the allocation of jobs in the service of fairness, many will answer: equality of opportunity. I tell students that this principle is a can of worms which they should investigate carefully. Cavanagh understands that a variety of principles and policies, together with their various implications and applications, parade under the flag of equality of opportunity. He's found a nice mess which it is just the job of philosophers to disentangle, not merely because the vulgar need correction (which they do) but because philosophers (Rawls, notably, in recent times) have accorded the principle a standing which may not bear the weight it is accorded. Anyone proposing to examine this principle now has Cavanagh's useful book to help them think through these issues. They should not be put off by the aggressively sceptical title that the book bears.

In Part 1, Cavanagh investigates 'meritocracy', 'the view that the best person should always get the job' (p. 33). This is deemed to be the default reading of demands for equality of opportunity. As the argument proceeds, it transpires that there are (at least) three different views of how meritocracy might work as an equal opportunities principle and the author does not always signal which view has his attention or give these different views the same weight. The first is a moral claim: a moral wrong, an injustice or unfairness, is done when the best person does not get the job. A second, stronger view is that the principle of equal opportunity, formulated, say, as above, is a legitimate ground for government coercion; it is permissible for governments to coerce private businesses to hire the best person for the job. The third, strongest, view is that governments have a duty to forbid the hiring of anyone but the very best applicant for a job. Except where the government is itself the employer, this last view may appear too silly to be discussed, but it may re-emerge as the rationale for the prohibition of e.g. racist employment policies. In Cavanagh's discussion of meritocracy, it is claimed to be a flaw in the meritocratic position that it may be rational but can't support widespread state intervention (p. 44). (Later, when he discusses discrimination, he points out against the libertarian that the wrongness of some kinds of discrimination is not impugned by the judgement that it may be impolitic for the state to intervene to prevent it (pp. 172–175).)



Cavanagh does a tidy job of distinguishing a variety of ways of reading the meritocratic principle. It transpires that the more substantial the construal of this principle, the less plausible it becomes. An important thread of argument, which resurfaces several times in the discussion, concludes that the principle of meritocracy fails to capture the appeal to fairness which talk of equal opportunities implies because it is best defended as an appeal to efficiency. It is not hard to identify defenders of the moral rightness (cf. fairness) of equal opportunities understood as meritocracy for whom this would be an acceptable result. And *pace* Cavanagh at p. 44, such a one need not be committed to either permissible or mandatory state intervention on these grounds. All would depend on the efficiency, in turn, of regulatory schemes.

In Part 2, Cavanagh explores the egalitarian credentials of the demand for equal opportunities. For sure, some conception of equality as a value must underpin a demand for *equal* opportunities, but the meritocracy principle does not state it (so, to quibble, it is odd that it be deemed the default position). A common understanding of equal opportunities is as a mixed principle: ‘that the best person should get the job but that everyone should have an equal opportunity or chance of becoming the best’ (p. 84). This perception licenses an investigation of modern egalitarianism quite generally, which I thought was not focused sufficiently sharply on the issue of equal opportunities. Or (and I think this is a reasonable view of the task Cavanagh sets for himself at this point) if he does aspire to challenge egalitarianism quite generally, he should take more time and space over it. A bit of argument, a bit of rhetoric, a paragraph on job allocation — this won’t cause his celebrity opponents (Rawls, Dworkin, Nagel, Cohen, to name a few) to lie on their backs, feet in the air, though they should feel themselves obliged to tackle Cavanagh’s sharp criticisms. Towards the end of this section (pp. 132–137) there is a really excellent argument concerning the justification of randomizing practices. It is not a value of equality in the specific sense of equal chances that causes us to toss coins when allocating indivisible goods. It is more likely a concern not to be thought biased, prejudiced or guilty of wrongful discrimination.

Why are certain ways of allocating jobs thought to be wrongly discriminatory? This is the question Cavanagh asks in Part 3. I think he is quite right to believe that this is the heart of the matter. In fact, if one looks at equal opportunities policies which employers advertise (‘The City of Glasgow is an Equal Opportunities employer’), such policies are expressed as statements such as: ‘job applicants and employees will not be discriminated against on grounds of . . .’ and thereafter follows a very long list, headed by sex and race. Cavanagh’s plausible claim is that wrongful discrimination involves treating people with unwarranted contempt in a domain which is central if they are to have some meaningful control over the course of their own lives.



One curious feature of the book is the author's flaunting of a kind of 'old fogey-ism', an anti-progressive, anti-PC posture, philosophy as Kingsley Amis might have done it in letters to Philip Larkin. This can lead to really trite discussions of matters of political importance, e.g. grammar school education (p. 144), and gibes about New Labour. But there is no doubt that this cast of mind opens up matters which should be confronted squarely and thought about honestly. If there is any domain of political philosophy wherein these virtues are desperately needed, the author has found it. Good for him if his style invites serious opposition. He can judge this monograph a success.

Dudley Knowles
Department of Philosophy, University of Glasgow.