

*The roots of disagreement over the relationship between the principle of equal opportunity and the ideal of equality are examined through a discussion of John Schaar's attempt to demonstrate their incompatibility. It is concluded that crucial questions of meaning cannot be answered without reference to a general context of social, political, and economic theory, and ultimately, to a normative philosophy of man. This variation of meaning with context has tended to be ignored or underestimated in contemporary discussions of equal educational opportunity. Special attention is drawn to the limitations of ordinary language analyses in this respect.*

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### Equal Opportunity: The Importance of being in Context\*\*

'Getting an education' has come to be recognized as one of those goods for which equality of opportunity is demanded. Of course, this may only mean that schooling of a particular kind has become a necessary condition for acquiring certain desired objectives in our society. But the practical point is that the slogan about equality of opportunity continues to be widely invoked as a fundamental principle in decisions of educational policy and practice, particularly where these decisions border on the domains of politics and economics. It is clear that many of those who appeal to the principle believe that it directly expresses some aspect of a moral-social ideal of human equality. They are not thinking of equality as more or less synonymous with justice,<sup>1</sup> but of a distinct ideal which requires that individuals should be treated in such a way that the outcome approaches the situation in which all human beings enjoy the same level of total good.<sup>2</sup> And they are confident that to press for equality of opportunity is to advance this ideal of equality.

Despite such confidence, the counter-claim has been made that the principle, far from advancing the ideal of equality, actually militates against it. What is the reason for such radical disagreement? Is it simply due to differences over the meaning of 'equality' or the criteria for what

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<sup>1</sup>Such a view is taken by B. Paul Komisar and Jerrold Coombs in "The Concept of Equality in Education", *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, III, 3 (1964), pp. 223-244. Cf. H. J. McCloskey, "Egalitarianism, Equality and Justice", *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 44, 1 (1966), pp. 50-69.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, G. W. Mortimore, "An Ideal of Equality", *Mind* (April, 1968), pp. 222-242.

counts as equal in specific situations? Or have people overlooked crucial conditions that affect the meaning-in-use of such principles as that of equality of opportunity? With these questions in mind I wish to examine John Schaar's attempt to show that acting on the principle of equality of opportunity is incompatible with an ideal of human equality.<sup>3</sup>

It is assumed in Schaar's discussion that the principle is being employed in the context of a society characterized by liberal democratic values and a capitalist market economy. His objective is to illustrate how the effort to achieve equality of opportunity in such conditions inevitably runs counter to the ideal of democratic equality. He points out a number of ways in which he believes the general political and economic context either shapes the meaning of the principle or dictates certain practical consequences of its application. With some adaptation and rearrangement, the main features of his case may be stated briefly as follows.

a) Equality of opportunity is a conservative principle. It simply accepts as its goal the skills, interests, and objects that a society happens to value at any time.

b) The principle assumes that success is the test of personal worth. The pursuit of almost all goods is viewed as a struggle in which each individual competes by and for himself against his fellows. Thus, although the principle stresses equality in the initial conditions, it is part of a theory that is designed to effect an unequal outcome.

c) The principle is misleading in several ways. (i) Individuals whose talents are not among the more highly prized and rewarded in the society do not have equality of opportunity with those whose talents are of such a kind. (ii) Because there are real differences among human beings in the capacities required for achieving many desired objects, the opportunity for success will necessarily be different. A dull child does not have the same chance of success at schooling as a bright one. (iii) In effect, everyone is being assured of the opportunity to go as far as he could have gone without the doctrine. Schaar gives the example of ten people running in a mile race. Nine of them are either overweight or middle-aged or physically handicapped and one is the world record holder for that distance. Although they may all be competing under the same rules, it is absurd to say that each one has an equal opportunity of winning. (iv) By stressing the equal conditions of the contest for the goods of our society, the policy of equal opportunity fosters uncritical acquiescence in a system that contradicts the democratic ideal of equality. The allurements of an equal chance (which in many cases doesn't exist) traps people into being unwitting accomplices of the system.

d) A requirement of the principle is that a society should exert its greatest effort in training the most superior members according to native abilities.

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<sup>3</sup>John H. Schaar, "Equality of Opportunity, and Beyond", *Equality*, J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman, eds. (New York: Atherton Press, 1967), pp. 228-249.

e) The consistent application of the principle gives rise to an elite based almost entirely on ability and achievement. Unlike the social aristocracies of the past, an elite of merit leaves the masses virtually devoid of first-rate talent. The enormous concentration of various forms of power in the hands of the natively well-endowed (at least relative to the goods that the society prizes) only widens the gap between them and the less capable.

f) The single-minded stress on a range of native capacities supposes that the question of how human beings should be treated is settled by "nature" and is not a matter of human responsibility.

It is not my intention to engage in a full-scale critique of Schaar's position. I wish to focus on the aspects that seem most related to the way in which the social, political, and economic arrangements of liberal democracy may influence the meaning and application of the principle of equal opportunity. Assuming this context, the question is whether Schaar's assertions about the behavior of the principle are correct. I shall first point out where I believe his claims are mistaken, or at least not entirely justified.

a) There is nothing in the principle of equal opportunity to require that the best treatment be given to the most able members of society. Even in what we may call the Liberal-Capitalist version, the purpose is to ensure that the chances of achieving the prized objects in the society are as close to being the same for every individual as they can be made. That is, the principle is directly concerned with those differences of ability between individuals that depend ultimately on human arrangements or can be controlled by human effort. Thus, in the provision of education, the principle of equal opportunity would seem to prescribe that the members of a society make a relatively greater effort on behalf of children who are in various ways handicapped than for others.

b) It is at least an exaggeration to claim that the principle, even in the Liberal-Capitalist setting, allows the treatment of human beings to be determined by the distribution of native abilities. Equality of opportunity is invoked primarily in the situation where, (i) an object is desired by a large number of people or is such that everyone should have it, and (ii) either from the nature of the case or because of contingencies beyond human control the object cannot be possessed by all.<sup>4</sup> Such conditions will frequently be realized in any social order. In many of these cases, merit of a certain kind will be the relevant ground for determining who is to receive the good. Even in an egalitarian society where specialized functions were not associated with differential extrinsic rewards, there would still be competition among those who were attracted by the intrinsic satisfaction of a position.

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<sup>4</sup>See Bernard Williams, "The Idea of Equality", *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (second Series), Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman, eds. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), Chapter 6.

Now, wherever merit is the deciding factor, the principle of equal opportunity requires that all who satisfy the conditions should have the same chance of obtaining the desired good, and that within the limits set by human possibility and other equally or more strongly desired values, everyone should have the same chance of acquiring the conditions of merit. Thus, in circumstances where there is competition for a good for which some specific achievement is a legitimate requirement, the principle prescribes that, as far as possible, actual differences should not be due to factors other than native ability. In such circumstances the attempt to make natural capacities decisive seems to be clearly justified. Moreover, the principle of equal opportunity entails the acceptance of a heavy responsibility for the factors that influence the development of each individual's personal capacities.

c) The foregoing comments also bear on Schaar's claims about the misleading character of the principle of equality of opportunity. Whatever concept of society one has in mind, it is simply a misunderstanding of the principle to suppose that it promises to cancel out all real differences in the capacities of human beings for achieving certain goods. Apart from physical impossibility, there are moral restraints in any system on the extent to which the factors that influence human performance can be manipulated. As we have seen, for goods involving merit, the principle demands social action to ensure that everyone with the same capacity has the same opportunity. It does not suggest that a person with an I.Q. of 90 does, or should, have the same chance to become a nuclear physicist as someone with an I.Q. of 140. But it is concerned that everyone with an I.Q. of 140 should have this same chance, and that everyone in the society with an I.Q. of 90 should have the same chance to perform at the limit of his capacity. The example of the runners is thus hardly to the point.

Apart from goods that depend on merit, there are the goods that human beings need either in particular circumstances (e.g., medical attention when they are sick) or as components of a worthwhile human life. In reference to these goods, the supporters of equal opportunity in Liberal-Capitalist societies have typically drawn attention to the discrepancy between real and merely formal or legal equality. Incidentally, the stress here is not on the opportunity to compete, but actually to possess what is needed or guaranteed to everyone in the society. In these various respects, and given the tendency of a Liberal-Capitalist system to generate sharp actual inequalities, it seems that the principle of equal opportunity does make a practical difference for people, whatever their native abilities may be, and does promote a larger measure of equality.

d) What of Schaar's claim that a serious application of the principle leads inevitably to a meritocracy? I will leave aside general questions about the desirability of an elite based on merit, and comment directly on his claim. First, if there are important decisions affecting a society for which

expert skill is required, it seems entirely desirable that these decisions should be made by people who possess such skill. Second, it does not seem that in accepting the principle of equal opportunity one is committed to a meritocracy. Whether or not there would be such an outcome depends on the total pattern of beliefs, values, and policies within which the principle is employed. If it is held, for example, that political decisions are typically of such a kind that no one can claim to be an expert at making them, or that political authority rests finally in all the people — and both these views are accepted in the theory and practice of Liberal-Capitalist society — then clearly the competition for positions of political power will not be determined primarily by criteria of technical skill. Perhaps more and more real power is being concentrated in the hands of a relatively few experts. But this would seem to be endemic to any technological society, not only to the Liberal-Capitalist variety.

e) In his comments on the conservative nature of the principle of equality of opportunity, Schaar seems to be objecting more to the kind of goods that are valued in our society than to some inherent characteristic of the principle itself. Certainly, an objection can hardly be made to the fact that in the Liberal-Capitalist system some things are prized over others, for it is inevitable that any society at a given time will express some scale of values. Schaar of course does imply that all human capacities and interests should be equally encouraged. However, it clearly seems to be the case that, whatever kind of values we may accept, we will judge some capacities and interests as being more worth encouraging than others, and will probably conclude that some should not be encouraged at all. Schaar himself is unhappy about the interests of budding capitalists. In addition to direct considerations of value, the practical limitations on the resources of a society will require some system of priorities.

The principle of equal opportunity seems to be neither conservative nor progressive in relation to the objectives that most people in a society happen to seek. The principle in itself, even with the modifications that the Liberal-Capitalist system may impose, expresses an aspect of the ideal of human equality; and historically this ideal has not been part of the established order. Of course, whether support for certain values amounts to being conservative or progressive is ultimately not significant. What matters is whether the values being promoted are worthwhile.

I turn now to the aspects of Schaar's argument that I take to be correct.

a) As he points out, the principle in itself has nothing whatever to say about the objects for which an equal chance is being claimed. Equality of opportunity will be worse than useless if the style of life to which it gives access is itself undesirable. It should also be noticed that even when we are concerned with an object that is obviously worthwhile (for example, education) it is still necessary to critically examine what is actually being done in the name of this value. Thus, whether we think everyone should have equality of opportunity is a question to which, as it stands,

we can hardly give a direct answer. We must first know about the objects for which the opportunity is sought.

b) Schaar condemns the whole style of life that is typical of a Liberal-Capitalist system and so concludes that the principle of equal opportunity is totally undesirable. Towards the end of his article, he recognizes that, given an adequate general social policy, the principle could play an acceptable part. Thus, it seems that his attack is really directed against the principle as it functions in the Liberal-Capitalist system. In the previous section I pointed out some features of his interpretation that I think are mistaken or exaggerated. In this context, I do not wish to assess his general critique of Liberal-Capitalist values, but will merely indicate how some features of this system, to which he draws attention, crucially affect the meaning of 'equality of opportunity'.

Consider, first, someone who supports the principle of equal opportunity but also accepts Liberal-Capitalist values. In approving the principle, he is probably acknowledging to some extent an ideal of equality; although he may simply support the principle as an application of justice. But, given his commitment to the policy of free competition in practically every area of life, he will, if consistent, interpret the principle of equal opportunity as saying in effect, 'arrange social conditions so that each individual can go as far as his native ability will take him'.

Consider, in contrast, someone who is committed to human equality as a fundamental moral-social ideal. For him, the principle will say in effect, 'arrange social conditions so that the level of total good enjoyed by each individual in the society will be approximately the same'. An egalitarian who urges the principle of equal opportunity in the context of a Liberal-Capitalist society should recognize that its meaning-in-use will be distorted, that in concert with the value of ubiquitous competition and the workings of the capitalist market economy, the outcome inevitably moves away from a state of equality in the possession of goods.

As a practical matter, Schaar is perhaps unduly pessimistic about the conservative effects of the principle in a Liberal-Capitalist society. From the viewpoint of the ideal of equality, the principle at least modifies inequity in the society to the extent that more people have a better chance for the rewards, and the rewards more often go to those who genuinely satisfy the criteria. But a thorough-going adoption of equal opportunity, by producing extensive movement between groups in the society, might eventually contribute to a fundamental change in social values. This issue is analogous to the question of how far welfare legislation goes in affecting the capitalist system. Probably the best estimate in both cases is that the prevailing system will be modified, but not radically altered.

In any event, what emerges clearly is that the crucial questions of meaning about the principle of equal opportunity cannot be answered without reference to a general context of social, political, and economic

theory, and ultimately, to a normative philosophy of man. This point is explicitly recognized by Schaar in relation to the ideal of equality: "Every strongly held theory or conception of equality is at once a psychology, an ethic, a theory of social relations, and a vision of the good society." (p. 228) The point is also effectively illustrated in the substance of Schaar's argument. For example, he says of the equal-opportunity doctrine (in the framework of a Liberal-Capitalist society) that it "rests on a narrow theory of motivation and a meager conception of man and society. It reduces man to a bundle of abilities, an instrument valued according to its capacity for performing socially valued functions with more or less efficiency." (p. 241) In the brief sketch of his own conception of the nature and scope of equality at the end of the article, he is basically making explicit some views about man and how he ought to live. He speaks of aspects under which all human beings should be treated in a common or average way, and of aspects under which each person is unique and mysterious — and where the question of equal or unequal does not apply.

In summary, I think the following points are established, either directly or indirectly, in Scharr's treatment of the principle of equal opportunity:

(i) Whether equal opportunity is desirable depends on the object to which it gives access.

(ii) The meaning of the principle cannot be adequately expressed or examined without relating it to general social, political, and economic theories, and to the theory of man that underlies them.

(iii) The version of the principle that reflects the dominant values of Liberal-Capitalist society is antithetical to the version that is based on equality as a distinct moral-social ideal.

Although these conclusions may seem to be fairly obvious, I think there has been a tendency in contemporary discussions of equal educational opportunity to overlook the issues they raise. Let me give a few illustrations.

a) Some exponents of preschool programs (for example, Carl Bereiter and Siegfried Engelmann) seem to assume that the provision of "equal opportunity" is a self-justifying objective. They are inclined to take the prevailing values of the society for granted, and to accept what is happening in the elementary and high schools as an adequate approximation to what education ought to be.

b) Although the contributors to the *Harvard Educational Review's* special issue on equal educational opportunity<sup>5</sup> are concerned about the quality of schooling, none of them raises questions about the general context of theory and policy that shapes the meaning of the claim for equal opportunity and radically affects its application. Only the article by

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<sup>5</sup>*Harvard Educational Review*, 38, 1 (1968).

Samuel Bowles discusses some issues that lie in the direction of such an inquiry. There is no philosophical treatment of the principle of equal educational opportunity in the publication. The closest approximation is James Coleman's article, which provides an historical outline of various interpretations given to the principle in American society over the past hundred years. The important point is that they all fit neatly within the Liberal-Capitalist framework. Even the recent version that emphasizes equality in educational outcome does not break the mold: it wants equality in the educational product in order to ensure equality of economic competition. Although all the contributors clearly believe that equality of educational opportunity is a good thing, there is no effort to lay bare the philosophical view or views of man implicit in their faith.

(c) Some recent analyses of the meaning of 'equality of educational opportunity and 'equality' by philosophers of education have also tended to ignore the influence of a theoretical context that is not necessarily reflected in the usage of ordinary language. Consider, for example, Myron Lieberman's "Equality of Educational Opportunity" and the article by Paul Komisar and Jerrold Coombs called "The Concept of Equality in Education."<sup>6</sup>

(i) Lieberman's purpose is to describe and analyse what people (in our society) mean when they talk about 'equality of educational opportunity'. Within this scope, he brings out clearly the kinds of factors that are involved in deciding whether people have received equal treatment in particular cases. However, he does not examine the larger issue of the meaning. Who are the people whose usage he is analysing? Would his analysis fit the sense in which, say, R. H. Tawney or Harold Laski use the phrase? Presumably he is talking about a majority of people in the United States, and presumably, for most of these, the meaning of 'equality of educational opportunity' is shaped by the values and policies of the Liberal-Capitalist system that they more or less uncritically accept. At the end, we may still ask, 'Very well, but why should we accept any variant of this prevailing theory of equal opportunity?'

Lieberman mentions that what will count as a substantial difference in educational opportunity is established by the dominant social goals. He points out that if these change, the conditions that will be accepted in practice as amounting to equal educational opportunity will also change. He seems to assume that the meaning of the principle does not vary through all the changes in criteria. As long as the Liberal-Capitalist system remains essentially intact, I think this assumption is correct. But what of someone (like Schaar, for instance) who proposes a social-moral ideal of equality that radically calls into question some of the most fundamental beliefs of the Liberal-Capitalist society; who, let us say, wants to

<sup>6</sup>Myron Lieberman, "Equality of Educational Opportunity", *Language and Concepts in Education*, B. Othanel Smith and Robert H. Ennis, eds. (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1961), Chapter 9.

Komisar and Coombs, *op. cit.*

break up the whole pattern in which there are vast differences in material reward and status tied closely to scholastic achievement, and to treat education, not as a competitive commodity, but as a process of self-perfection? Surely, in such a case, the meaning of 'equality of educational opportunity' has changed significantly.

(ii) Komisar and Coombs examine the meaning of 'equality' as used in relation to education. The question is whether it has the sense of 'same' or of 'fitting'. They conclude in favor of the latter concept, to the exclusion of the former, by claiming that there are many occasions in the conduct of education on which the treatment is fair or fitting but clearly not the same, and is yet commonly referred to as 'equal treatment'.

The authors stress that the criteria of what will count as fitting are not given in the meaning of the term, but depend on the context of moral commitment in which the equality principle is employed. This recognition of context is welcome, but it is not carried far enough. It is assumed that although the context will affect the application of the principle of equality, the meaning of the concept of equality can be determined independently. If the author's claims about common usage are correct, they simply show that in many people's social-moral scheme, the ideal of equality is treated as a form of justice. But it is also the case that in at least some people's social-moral scheme, equality is a distinct human ideal. It may, in fact, even modify the concept of justice (as in John Rawls's "Justice as Fairness").<sup>7</sup> The important point here, however, is that in this context the term 'equality' is used as equivalent to 'same' or 'like', and the meaning of the equality principle is given in the particular version of the distinct ideal of equality that is proposed. The impact of such an interpretation of equality on education is quite different from one that is limited to resolving variations of treatment in terms of fittingness.

If an inquiry into the moral and political concept of equality is to be both philosophically adequate and useful to education, it must penetrate beyond what is given in the usages of ordinary language and grapple with the relatively technical normative theories of man and society in which the meaning of 'equality' as a moral term is established. This is the level at which the most interesting and crucial philosophical debate begins.

What has just been said applies of course to the wide range of philosophical questions that relate to any theory involving standards of human action. The philosophical probing of these questions is essentially, as Hampshire acknowledges, "a search for a definition of man".<sup>8</sup> A careful analysis of the justifying grounds of liberal democracy, for example, will show that the point of departure is a particular way of interpreting man. Perhaps he is seen principally as a consumer ("a bundle of appetites de-

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<sup>7</sup>In *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Second Series), Chapter 7.

<sup>8</sup>Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 232. This book develops explicitly and exemplifies the kind of position I am briefly stating in this conclusion. See, particularly, Chapter 4.

manding satisfaction") or as a doer and creator ("a bundle of conscious energies seeking to be exercised"). It has been argued that an uneasy mixture of these two interpretations is basic to the classical argument for the superiority of liberal democracy.<sup>9</sup> Another illustration is provided by Isaiah Berlin's essay on "Two Concepts of Liberty". As he points out, the whole of his discussion demonstrates — what he takes to be an obvious truth — "that the conception of freedom directly derives from the view that is taken of what constitutes a self, a person, a man."<sup>10</sup>

I am not denying the value of attending to ordinary language. It is always a useful component of inquiry, and often a necessary starting point. But its philosophical yield is uneven. For the kind of question we are considering, it is altogether insufficient. Part of the trouble of course is that the important role of a philosophical viewpoint as a whole is obscured by the method of piecemeal, close analysis of particular items. But in addition to the defect of inadequacy, ordinary language analysis tends to be misleading in an important respect. What appears to be a neutral description of the logical features of something that is treated as simply given and beyond dispute may already involve at least implicit assumptions, including a view of man, that prejudice the issues of substance. This problem is illustrated in ethical theory. The attempt to treat moral vocabulary in purely formal terms, for example, apart from running the danger of being vacuous, seems to involve a judgment that begs the question about the nature of morality (namely, whether it can be characterized adequately without reference to any kind of content), and may also reflect the presuppositions of a thoroughly individualist interpretation of life.<sup>11</sup>

The implications for educational theory are obvious enough. It is theory of the kind that guides the conduct of a certain range of human activity, and is complexly meshed with moral and political theories. Thus, if philosophers are to contribute significantly to its making, they must be willing to examine directly the content of the theories, particularly the often submerged interpretations of man, that shape many of the crucial concepts; and in the process, to take a stand, however tentative; to make and defend judgments of value.

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<sup>9</sup>C. B. Macpherson, "The Maximization of Democracy", *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Third Series), Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman, eds. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), Chapter 4. The quotations are on pp. 84 and 85.

<sup>10</sup>Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty", *Political Philosophy*, Anthony Quinton, ed. (Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 152.

<sup>11</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: The Macmillan Press, 1966), p. 264.

On the same point, Iris Murdoch remarks: "Linguistic analysis claims simply to give a philosophical description of the human phenomenon of morality, without making any moral judgments. In fact the resulting picture of human conduct has a clear moral bias. The merits of linguistic analytical man are freedom (in the sense of detachment, rationality), responsibility, self-awareness, sincerity, and a lot of utilitarian common sense." "On 'God' and 'Good'", *The Anatomy of Knowledge*, Marjorie Grene, ed. (Amhurst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1969), pp. 235-6.