

## *Talents and Choices*

GEORGE SHER

Rice University

Most luck egalitarians believe that it is unjust for some to have less than others for reasons that are beyond their control. Most believe, as well, that a person's native talents, but not his choices, *are* beyond his control. From these premises, it is often inferred that economic inequalities are always unjust when they are due to differences in talent, but are not always unjust when the more advantaged parties have chosen to work harder or to take greater risks. However, in the current paper, I will argue that the distinction between choice and talent is far harder to sustain than this argument suggests.<sup>1</sup> From the distinction's breakdown, I will conclude not that luck egalitarians should reject even those inequalities that they have traditionally accepted, nor yet that they should try to disentangle the contributions of choice and talent, but rather that they should accept many inequalities that they have traditionally rejected.

Because the idea that choice is independent of talent has been called into question by others, I want to make clear how my approach differs from theirs. When others question the distinction, they generally do so either on the grounds that (1) our choices are causally influenced, if not altogether determined, by physical or psychological states or events that in their turn are beyond our control, or else that (2) we typically make our choices in light of what we believe about the constellation of (unchosen) talents upon which we will have to draw in order to implement them. Because both lines of reasoning take our choices to exist independently of the talents and other unchosen factors that are said to influence them, they both seem vulnerable to the reply that the unchosen factors are too external to choice to threaten its integrity. Here, by contrast, I will argue that choice is related far more intimately to talent—that a person's unchosen abilities impinge upon his choices not merely as their causes, nor yet as considerations to be taken account of when

he chooses, but rather by shaping the very alternatives that, from his own perspective, constitute the options among which he must choose. Because talent penetrates subjectivity in this deeper way, its relation to choice is unavoidably internal.

## I

The claim that inequalities are always unjust when they are due to luck, but are not always unjust when they are due to (responsible) choice, is the lynchpin of luck egalitarianism. Although Ronald Dworkin's influential early statement of the position is not consistently couched in these terms,<sup>2</sup> this claim is central to the statements advanced by Gerald Cohen, Thomas Nagel, and Richard Arneson, among many others.<sup>3</sup>

Nagel's formulations of the claim, and of its implications about the justice of economic inequalities that are due to differences in talent as opposed to choice, are especially perspicuous. With characteristic directness, Nagel writes in *Equality and Partiality* that

[w]hat seems bad is not that people should be unequal in advantages or disadvantages generally, but that they should be unequal in the advantages or disadvantages for which they are not responsible.<sup>4</sup>

Bringing this principle to bear on inequalities that reflect differences in talent, he says that

[t]o try to sever the connection between talent and admiration would be wrong. But to sever the connection between talent and income, if it could be done, would be fine. Those with useful talents do not naturally deserve more material benefits than those who lack them.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, about inequalities that reflect differences in choice, he writes:

Persons with the same resources and the same talents but different preferences will naturally choose to employ their talents differently, some taking their benefits in the form of more leisure, others in the form of this or that kind of commodity or opportunity or security. This enhances rather than disturbs the equality of morally significant advantages.<sup>6</sup>

In advancing these claims, Nagel gives clear expression to the argument I want to examine.

At first glance, the argument's rationale for treating talents differently from choices may appear to be simply that a person's talents are not within his control whereas his choices are. However, to reconstruct the argument this way is to represent it as mixing categories by comparing talents, which are enduring abilities that can be exercised on different occasions, with choices,

which are one-time events. As so understood, the argument is vulnerable to the objection that choosing, too, is an exercise of an ability—the ability to choose—and that just as the talents that enable some but not others to catch passes, write best-sellers, and manage large companies are beyond their control, so too is the ability to make choices about how to *employ* one's talents. Because the ability to choose is just as unchosen as any other ability, it follows that if our lack of control over our talents is what disqualifies their exercise from being a source of just inequalities, then our lack of control over our choice-making ability will also disqualify *its* exercise from being a source of just inequalities. Conversely, if our lack of control over our choice-making ability does *not* disqualify its exercise from being a source of just inequalities, then neither will our lack of control over our talents disqualify *their* exercise from being a source of just inequalities.

Because both sorts of ability are equally unchosen, the impulse to distinguish choice from talent must rest on some further difference. There is, however, no real mystery about what this further difference is; for the obvious point of contrast is that the ability to choose is distributed equally among all people while the more specific abilities that we exercise when we catch footballs, write compelling prose, or market new products are not. Because we are all equally capable of making choices, it seems that no one who ends up with less than others because he has chosen not to work as hard, or because he has decided to play it safe rather than take risks, is entitled to complain that the more advantaged owe their superior position to their exercise of an ability that he cannot help lacking. By contrast, because people do differ in all manners of talent, someone who ends up with less than others because he is less talented than they are often *is* in a position to make this complaint. Thus, to sidestep the objection that a person's choice-making ability is just as unchosen as any talent, the argument's proponents can simply replace the claim that it is the unchosen nature of a person's talents that disqualifies their exercise from being a source of just inequalities with the slightly more complicated claim that it is the *inequality* of people's unchosen talents that disqualifies their exercise from being a source of just inequalities.

## II

Because the need for this revision is so obvious, I assume that any proponent of the argument under discussion would accept it as a friendly amendment. However, friendly or not, the amendment immediately raises a new problem. If people differ only in talent but not in choice-making ability, then even if two similarly situated individuals cannot achieve the same amount, each must at least be able to make all the same choices. Thus, if one ends up with less than the other, the explanation cannot be that the other made a choice that he could not make, but must instead be either that (1) he made a different choice from the same range of options, or else that (2) he made

the same choice but, being less talented, was less effective at implementing it.

But is it really true that whenever a more and a less talented agent are in the same situation, they are able to choose from the same range of options? Doubts arise when we remind ourselves that an agent can only choose to perform an action that he *recognizes* as being among his options, and can only choose to perform an action on the basis of a particular good- or right-making feature if he *thinks it has* that feature. These facts threaten the distinction between talent and choice-making ability because the ways in which agents conceptualize their options are themselves influenced by their talents. Given the role that each person's unchosen tendencies of thought play in determining how he thinks about his situation, there is a real danger that many of the differences in people's talents will bleed over into their choice-making abilities.

As just stated, this danger is quite general. However, when luck egalitarians affirm the justice of inequalities that stem from differences in choice, they are generally talking only about choices between taking risks and playing it safe, between productive activity and leisure, or between immediate consumption and deferred gratification. Because these are the choices that matter for our purposes, I will develop my argument only in connection with them. To convey an initial sense of the ways in which a person's risk-related choices are shaped by his unchosen talents, I will begin with the admittedly extreme example of the choices that a person makes while playing poker.

Although poker clearly involves skills that can be developed, it is equally clear that some are more gifted than others at keeping track of the cards that have been played, at calculating the rapidly shifting odds, at reading their opponents' faces and body language, and at thinking strategically. Let us suppose, therefore, that M is more talented than L in these dimensions, and that, as a result, M sees many things about each hand that entirely elude L. Unlike M, L is oblivious to all but the most obvious good- and bad-making features of the available options, and many of those options—for example, overbetting on certain hands to establish a misleading pattern—simply do not occur to him. As a result, M wins the majority of the hands that he and L play. Thus, after their game, L is worse off than M because of his risk-related choices, but his disadvantage is not for that reason unaffected by his having less talent. What is true, rather, is that the content of L's choices has itself been *determined* by his level of talent. If L had been more talented, he simply would not have made the choices he did.

Considered in isolation, this example shows only that it is *possible* for a person's level of talent to affect his ability to make choices that involve risk. However, if the case is sufficiently atypical, then it will do little damage to the claim that the inequalities that exist because people have chosen different levels of risk are sometimes just. *A fortiori*, it will do little damage to the claim that inequalities that exist because people have made different choices about

how hard to work, or about whether to consume or invest, are sometimes just. Thus, before we can assess the poker example's impact, we must ask how representative such choices really are.

They clearly are atypical in certain respects; for most risk-related choices are not made in directly competitive situations, and neither do they require the rapid calculation of odds or sensitivity to subtle behavioral cues. The important question, though, is how much these differences matter. That they do not matter much is suggested by the broad range of other, more typical ways in which people's talents can affect their ability to make risk-related choices. Agents notoriously differ in their ability to (a) envision courses of action that will enable them to achieve their goals; (b) foresee all the outcomes to which the actions they envision may lead; (c) vividly imagine the impact that various foreseen outcomes would have on them; and (d) accurately assess the probabilities of the possible outcomes. Although some of these abilities can to some extent be cultivated, there is no more reason to suppose that an unimaginative or impractical person can transform himself into an imaginative or practical one than there is to suppose that a poor physical specimen can transform himself into an NFL lineman.

Because each of the cited abilities significantly affects the way an agent frames his options, each must also affect the choices he actually makes. Thus, when one of two agents ends up worse off than the other because he alone took a risk that did not pay off, the reason the risky option seemed more attractive to him may be that he is a rigid, stereotyped thinker to whom the safer option simply did not occur; that he is less clear-headed and so did not fully understand how bad the outcome could be; that he has less imagination and so did not vividly appreciate the impact that a bad outcome would have on his life; or that he is worse at processing information and so overestimated the probability of a good outcome. In each case, an inequality that initially appears to reflect only a difference in the parties' risk-related choices will on closer examination reflect a difference in their unchosen abilities.<sup>7</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, the same can be said about many of the cases in which the risk does pay off, and it is the person who plays it safe who ends up with less.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, despite some superficial differences, the same can also be said about many of the inequalities that exist because some have opted for leisure or consumption while others have chosen to work hard or save. Here again, the divergence in the parties' choices can often be traced to differences in the way they conceptualize their situations—differences that in their turn reflect their unequal cognitive abilities. Just as one person may take more risks than another because he is not as clever at coming up with safe alternatives or is not as good at envisioning possible bad outcomes, so too may one person work less hard than another because he is not as resourceful at finding well-paying work or is not as clever at budgeting his time; and so too again may one person consume while others save because he is not as good

at imagining what it would be like to be poor or at estimating his future needs.

This same point—that what I have said about choices about risk applies also to choices about work and saving—can also be made in another way. A person who chooses to take it easy rather than work hard, or to consume rather than defer gratification, may fare well enough if he encounters no unexpected expenses or impediments to future earnings; but he is likely to fare badly if he gets sick or jobs become scarce. Because the probabilities of future illness and unemployment are non-trivial, someone who opts for leisure and immediate consumption is in effect gambling that things will go well for him, while someone who chooses to work hard and save is refusing to gamble. When the choice between taking it easy and consuming and working hard and saving is viewed in this light, it stands revealed as a choice between different levels of risk. However, we have already seen that an agent's risk-related choices are often influenced by his unchosen cognitive abilities. This, therefore, is a further reason to conclude that many of the inequalities that arise because people make different choices about how hard to work and how much to save can in their turn be traced to differences in abilities over which the parties have no control.

### III

Despite the effects of talent on people's views of their choice situations, it remains implausible to suppose that whenever similarly situated agents make choices that leave them unequally advantaged, the less advantaged agent chose as he did because he is less talented. One obvious alternative is that the less advantaged agent is equally or even more talented, but simply has had worse option luck. However, for our purposes, the more important possibility is that the two agents are equally talented, and thus have the same range of effective options, but have made different choices *within* that range. Even if two similarly situated agents are equally ingenious, equally clear-headed, and equally imaginative, it is quite possible that one will choose to take great risks, to work as little as possible, or to consume on a lavish scale, while the other will choose to play it safe, work hard, or save.

In a case of this sort, the resulting inequality is not due to any factor that is beyond either party's control. For this reason, most luck egalitarians would presumably view such inequalities as just. This suggests that even if the interpenetration of choice and talent does compel the luck egalitarian to reject some of the inequalities that stem from differences in people's choices, it does not compel him to reject them all. At worst, the range of choices that are capable of rendering inequalities just may be smaller than it first appears. Because many luck egalitarians tend to view the reasons for departing from equality as largely theoretical, and to minimize their practical import, this conclusion would line up nicely with what many of them actually believe.<sup>9</sup>

It seems to me, however, that the conclusion is incorrect, and that the real thrust of my argument is in just the opposite direction. In the remainder of my discussion, I will argue that when we conjoin the insight that choice and talent are intertwined with the underlying rationale for accepting inequalities that are due to (responsible) choice, we find that luck egalitarians actually have reason to accept more inequality rather than less. More specifically, by getting clear about the normative underpinnings of the luck egalitarians' willingness to accept inequalities that reflect the parties' choices, we will discover that the interpenetration of choice and talent actually gives them reason to acknowledge the justice not only of many inequalities that arise when more talented agents make more advantageous choices than others, but also of some that arise when more talented agents *implement* their choices more effectively. It is perhaps unnecessary to add that if this conclusion can be sustained, the view that emerges will definitely not be in keeping with mainstream luck egalitarian thought.

Although luck egalitarianism is more often presupposed than defended, the underlying thought is pretty clearly that fairness requires both the elimination of inequalities that cannot be traced the parties' choices and the preservation of inequalities that can. Gerald Cohen nicely captures the idea that fairness is the unifying thread when he writes:

Possessed of the premise that luck has caused enormous unjust inequality, the traditional egalitarian proposes, rather rashly, and in the name of fairness: plain, ordinary equality. But now a responsibility objection is pressed against her. Why should one person pay for another's truly optional choices? Since the question appeals to the very conception of fairness that inspired her initial protest against inequality, the egalitarian who rides under the banner of fairness cannot... ignore the objection that the question formulates. So, in deference to fairness, the relevant egalitarian says that she's against inequalities in the absence of appropriately differential responsibility...but that is to say that she's against inequalities if and only if they're a matter of luck. She is against luck *in the name of fairness*.<sup>10</sup>

Because Cohen characterizes unfair inequalities sometimes as involving disadvantages that do not reflect the (worse-off?) parties' choices, but sometimes instead as involving disadvantages for which the (worse-off?) parties are not responsible, his formulations do not yield a clear verdict about inequalities that involve disadvantages that the worse-off parties have not chosen, but for which they nevertheless *are* responsible.<sup>11</sup> However, whatever Cohen thinks about this, he clearly would reject as unfair any inequalities whose worse-off parties neither have chosen nor are responsible for their disadvantages.

When one of two similarly situated parties makes a more advantageous choice than the other because he is more talented, the less talented party does not choose, and is not responsible for, the inequality that results. For

this reason, Cohen might well reject that inequality on the grounds that it is unfair. Moreover, whatever Cohen says about this, he clearly will reject any inequalities that arise when two similarly situated parties make similar choices, but the more talented of the two is able to *implement* his choice more effectively. Thus, if Cohen has correctly understood the notion of fairness in which both elements of luck egalitarianism are grounded, then my contention that luck egalitarians should accept more inequality than they in fact do will not be defensible.

But exactly why *should* the relevant notion of fairness be understood in this way? Why suppose that the best way to make sense of luck egalitarianism is to take it to rest on a conception of fairness that rules out all inequalities whose worse-off parties neither have chosen nor are responsible for their disadvantages? The inequalities that seem most obviously unfair—the ones that arise because some people face legal or social barriers that others don't, or because some inherit wealth while others don't—are all due to factors that bear *no relation at all* to the choices of the worse-off parties. Hence, to condemn *these* inequalities, we need only say that inequalities are unfair whenever the choices of the worse-off parties have played *no* role in bringing them about. However, if it is possible to justify the most important egalitarian reactions by saying only this much, then we cannot simply assume that the relevant notion of fairness must also condemn all inequalities that arise because more talented agents make more advantageous choices than similarly situated but less talented ones. To find out whether the relevant notion does condemn all such inequalities—to ascertain exactly how an agent's level of advantage must be related to his choices if the ensuing inequality is to be fair—we must look beyond the abstract idea of fairness to the substantive normative considerations that give it content in the current context.

#### IV

But just what are these considerations? To what normative premises might one appeal to justify the claim that inequalities are fair if, but only if, they stand in some suitable relation to the choices of the affected parties? And, whatever these premises are, what can they tell us about the fairness of inequalities that arise because some agents have unchosen talents that allow them to make more advantageous choices than others who are similarly situated?

Despite the intimacy of the connection between luck egalitarianism and fairness, these questions are rarely asked, much less answered, in the luck egalitarian literature. Still, despite the paucity of explicit discussion, the relations between justice and choice, and between justice and responsibility, are not hard to discern. The reason we care about distributive justice in the first place is that we view each person's life as equally important; and to live the sort of life we take to *be* important, a person must be in charge of what goes



on in it. A person cannot live a meaningful life if he is not permitted to make choices about matters that concern him, or if his choices about these matters have no impact on the way his life actually goes. Thus, the reason any just distributive scheme must allow people to make meaningful choices, and must allow (many of) their consequences to play themselves out, is simply that if these requirements are not met, then the conditions under which distributive justice matters will themselves be undermined.

As I have just reconstructed it, the normative importance that luck egalitarians attach to honoring the effects of people's choices is a direct consequence of the applicability conditions of distributive justice itself. Through an extension of this reasoning, we may also be able to account for the normative importance that luck egalitarians attach to not altering outcomes for which the parties themselves are *responsible*. However, whether or not this last argument works, we can also reconstruct the reasoning behind the luck egalitarians' unwillingness to alter outcomes for which the parties are responsible in another way. It is a commonplace that we are under a stringent obligation to respect each person as a rational agent, and it is a commonplace, as well, that we cannot respect someone as a rational agent without treating him as responsible both for his choices and for their foreseeable outcomes. Thus, when luck egalitarians assert that inequalities are rendered just by the fact that the worse off parties are responsible for their own disadvantages, they may not be basing their view exclusively in their commitment to justice itself, but may instead, or in addition, be allowing whatever requirements do flow from that commitment to be constrained by their distinct but equally strong commitment to respecting each individual as a responsible agent.<sup>12</sup>

Taking my cue from this, I now want to suggest that when luck egalitarians speak (or think) of some inequalities as defensible on grounds of fairness, their appeal to fairness is really a proxy for one or both of two deeper arguments, one choice-related and the other responsibility-related. Here, in brief, is how the two arguments run.

### 1. *The choice-related argument*

1. Any just distributive scheme must allow the parties to live their own lives on their own terms;
2. It is impossible for anyone to live his own life on his own terms if he is not permitted to exercise control over his life's main elements;
3. If agents were prevented from making their own choices about risk, consumption, and leisure—or, what comes to the same thing, if they were allowed to make those choices but the inequalities that flow from them were systematically eliminated—then they would not exercise the requisite form of control over the main elements of their lives; so
4. No just distributive scheme will eliminate all, or even most, of the inequalities that stem from differences in people's choices about risk, consumption, or leisure.

## 2. *The responsibility-related argument*

1. Any just distributive scheme must treat the parties as responsible agents;
2. When people choose between taking risks and playing it safe, between consuming and saving, or between working and taking it easy, they are often responsible for the impact that their choices will have on their economic circumstances;
3. When a person is responsible for his own burdensome economic circumstances, treating him as a responsible agent involves allowing him to bear the relevant burden;
4. When a person is responsible for his own beneficial economic circumstances, treating him as a responsible agent involves allowing him to enjoy the relevant benefit; so
5. When two similarly situated persons make different choices involving risk, consumption, or leisure for whose consequences they are responsible, and when one is left in burdensome economic circumstances while the other is not, a just distributive scheme will generally leave the resulting inequality intact.

Although both formulations are very rough, and although there may also be other ways of filling in the normative basis of the fairness argument,<sup>13</sup> I think it is clear that these are at least among the main possibilities. It is, therefore, well worth asking what each argument implies about the justice of (1) economic inequalities that owe their existence to differences in choice that in their turn are due to differences in unchosen talent, and (2) economic inequalities that arise because those with greater talents are able to implement their choices more effectively than those with lesser talents.

## V

Let us begin with inequalities that stem from differences in choice that in turn reflect differences in talent; and let us first ask what the choice-related argument implies about these inequalities. Because that argument rests on the premise that no distributive scheme can be just if it prevents the parties from living their own lives on their own terms, the crucial question here is whether a person *can* live his own life on his own terms when his low level of talent prevents him from making choices that leave him as well off as others. That the answer to this question is “yes” is suggested by two mutually reinforcing considerations: first, that the form of control that one must exercise in order to live one’s life on one’s own terms does not appear to be either deep or total or metaphysical, and, second, that the requirement that each agent must exercise such control is non-comparative rather than comparative.

The first consideration—that the requisite form of control is neither deep nor total nor metaphysical—is simply a reflection of the fact that that form of control is pegged to the agent’s own perspective. What someone needs to live his own life on his own terms is not control “all the way down,” but only

the latitude to make what he sees as the right choices at crucial junctures of his life—choices that prominently include decisions about whether to take risks or play it safe, whether to work hard or take it easy, and whether to consume or save. Because a person's ability to make what he sees as the right choices about these matters is entirely unaffected by his inability to choose either the talents that determine how he views his alternatives or the view of his alternatives to which those talents give rise, it seems quite possible for someone to have no control at all over his choice-shaping talents, yet fully to exercise the form of control over his own life that this argument takes to matter.

This conclusion is reinforced, moreover, by the fact that the requirement that agents be allowed to live their own lives on their own terms applies to individuals one by one rather than as a collectivity. Because the requirement makes no demands about the relations between or among agents, its demands cannot be violated by any inequalities that arise because some are better at choosing than others. Even if a given agent is so muddled and unimaginative that his poor choices regularly leave him with less than others, what matters from the requirement's point of view is only that the choices that determine the course of his *own* life remain his own. If they do, then the requirement is satisfied even if he ends up with less than others; if they do not, the requirement is violated even if he ends up with as much or more. Despite the agent's lesser choice-making ability, any attempt to maintain equality by preempting or nullifying his choices about risk, consumption, or leisure will still violate the requirement by depriving him of effective control over the only life he will ever have. Thus, even when such interventions are justified on paternalistic or perfectionistic grounds—as I think they sometimes clearly are—their justification will never be supplied by, but rather will remain in tension with, the basic premise upon which the choice-related argument rests.

If someone bases his acceptance of luck egalitarianism on the choice-related argument, he has no reason to take the differences in talent that cause some agents to make less advantageous choices than others to render the resulting inequalities unjust. But what, next, of someone who bases his acceptance of luck egalitarianism on the responsibility-related argument? As we have seen, this argument rests on the premises that it is not unjust for someone to bear a burden, or to enjoy a benefit, for which he himself is responsible. Thus, the crucial question here is whether an agent can be responsible for a disadvantage—or, by extension, for an inequality—that arises as a result of a choice that he makes because he is less talented than others. The answer to this question will of course be “no” if determinism is both true and incompatible with responsibility; but if the reason an agent cannot be responsible for the disadvantageous consequences of his talent-influenced choices is that no one is responsible for *anything*, then the contribution that his lack of talent makes to those choices will drop out as irrelevant.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, because we often do hold agents responsible for bad outcomes that their cognitive limitations prevented them from recognizing,<sup>15</sup> common thought and usage seem clearly compatible with the view that agents *can* be responsible for disadvantageous choices that they would not have made if they were more talented. Thus, pending some further argument of a kind that I cannot now envision, we may conclude that the unchosen lack of talent that prevents agents from making more advantageous choices does not compel the proponents of the responsibility-related argument to conclude that the resulting inequalities are unjust.

Nor, finally, are they compelled to draw this conclusion on the further grounds that the unchosen but choice-influencing talents of the more and less advantaged parties are *unequal*. To see why such comparative considerations are irrelevant, we need only remind ourselves that the conclusion of the responsibility-related argument—that inequalities that are due to the different choices of similarly situated but differentially talented agents need not be unjust—is arrived at by conjoining two simpler claims: first, that it need not be unjust for the more advantaged party to have the level of advantage for which he is responsible, and, second, that it need not be unjust for the less advantaged party to have the level of (dis)advantage for which *he* is responsible. Because each simpler claim mentions only the responsibility of a single person, and because what any given person is responsible for depends entirely on facts about him, no relational facts, and in particular no facts about the difference in the agents' choice-making abilities, can possibly affect the truth of either claim. Thus, whether someone bases his acceptance of luck egalitarianism on the responsibility-related argument or the choice-related argument, the range of inequalities that he regards as just should not be affected by the fact that some agents are more talented at choosing than others.

## VI

So far, I have argued only that the interpenetration of choice and talent *does not diminish* the range of inequalities that luck egalitarians have reason to count as just. But what, next, of my more ambitious claim that that interpenetration actually *increases* the range of these inequalities? Do luck egalitarians really have reason to accept not only inequalities that arise because the talented are better than the untalented at *making* choices about risk, work, or consumption, but also inequalities that arise because the talented are better than the untalented at *implementing* those choices?

The first thing to say here is that this way of formulating the question makes the distinction between choosing and implementing one's choices seem much cleaner than it actually is. If this is not immediately apparent, it is probably because I have so far invoked the interpenetration of choice and talent to show only how a person's choices are affected by his talents. However, in

fact, the interpenetration also works the other way; for just as each agent's view of his choice situation is shaped by his unchosen talents, so too does (just about) every exercise of talent involve many further choices. When an agent draws on a talent in the course of implementing a choice, he typically does so precisely by making effective subordinate decisions. We exercise our literary talents by making choices about what words to use and how to structure our sentences; our pedagogical talents by making choices about how to present information and gauge student uptake; and our athletic talents by making choices about how to move our bodies.

This last point holds despite the fact that an athlete's choices are seldom preceded by deliberation. When an NBA player pulls up to take a jump shot, he has no time to think through what he will do, but in the course of taking the shot, he still must make various further choices about how to position his feet, how high to jump, and what arc to put on the ball. His display of talent consists precisely of his making these choices well. Although his movements are heavily influenced by habit and muscle memory, they nevertheless reflect genuine choices because it is within his power to perform them differently—witness the prevalence, in coachspeak, of the expression “making good decisions.” When a gifted player like Michael Jordan or Kobe Bryant outperforms a less talented journeyman with equivalent training, the difference lies largely in the superiority of these subordinate choices.<sup>16</sup>

Because the connection between choice and talent is so intimate—because there are no pure choices and very few pure exercises of talent—I can see no way of disentangling the contribution that each has made to any given inequality. That is why I don't think luck egalitarians should respond to the entanglement by seeking to eliminate only that proportion of each inequality that is due to talent rather than (responsible) choice.<sup>17</sup> However, it is one thing to say that luck egalitarians should not get bogged down in judgments about what proportion of each inequality is due to a difference in talent, and quite another to say that they should fully accept any inequalities that arise when some accomplish more than others *because* they are more talented. Thus, to complete my argument, I must offer some defense of the latter claim.

Perhaps predictably, my defense will simply extend what I have already said about the choice- and responsibility-related arguments. Where the choice-related argument is concerned, I said that in order to live his own life in his own way, an agent must be allowed to make effective choices about risk, leisure, and investment. However, as we just saw, an agent's choices about these matters encompass not only his broad executive decisions, but also the many subordinate decisions through which he implements these. Given the continuity between the broader and narrower decisions, the role that talent plays in shaping them seems equally relevant or irrelevant in both cases. Thus, if luck egalitarians should accept many of the inequalities that arise because

some agents are better than others at *making* broad-gauged choices about risk, leisure, and investment, then they should also accept at least some that arise because some are better than others at making the subordinate choices that are involved in *implementing* their broad-gauged choices.

A further example may be helpful here. Suppose M and L own similar houses, and that each decides to add a room in his spare time. Although neither has done anything like this before, M turns out to have a knack for it while L makes mistake after mistake. Thus, after a year, their houses differ greatly in value. In a case of this sort, the same appeal to the choice-related argument that suggests that M and L should be allowed to make effective decisions about whether to improve their houses will also suggest that they should be allowed to make effective subordinate decisions about such matters as materials, tools, and the sequencing of tasks. Because the texture of a person's life consists precisely of these details, an agent all of whose broad decisions were honored, but whose attempts at executing those decisions were systematically undone, could hardly be said to be living a life of his own. Moreover, what holds for the choice-related argument holds also for the responsibility-related argument; for an agent's responsibility, too, extends not only to his broad-gauged choices, but also to the narrower choices through which he implements these. It would be arbitrary and unmotivated to hold L responsible for his abstract decision to improve his house but not for the innumerable smaller decisions that confront any home improver. Thus, when the less talented L makes these subordinate decisions in ways that leave him less well off than M, the choice- and responsibility-related arguments will converge on the conclusion that the resulting inequality may well be just.

## VII

In this paper, I have argued that when we take seriously the interpenetration of choice and talent, we find that the most promising arguments for luck egalitarianism imply that its proponents should accept not only inequalities that stem from differences in choice that in turn are due to differences in talent, but also inequalities that stem from differences in talent that enable some to implement their choices more effectively than others. Under a capitalist system, agents whose greater talents enable them to implement their choices more effectively are more in demand as workers, and therefore earn more—often vastly more—than others. Thus, my argument may appear to imply that luck egalitarians should not be troubled by the often obscene gap between the earnings of high-ranking executives, star athletes, and popular entertainers on the one hand and those of laborers, busboys, secretaries, and custodians on the other.

Because anyone who is comfortable with this gap is not an egalitarian of any stripe,<sup>18</sup> an account that had this implication would simply be a *reductio*

of luck egalitarianism. For this reason, it is important to emphasize that my account implies no such thing. There are two ways to see this, the first of which is to remind ourselves that what the choice- and responsibility-related arguments preclude is only *systematic* interference with responsible choice. Because the choice-related argument requires only that each agent be able to live his own life in his own way, it is compatible with whatever amount of interference will still allow each agent to live as he sees fit; and because the responsibility-related argument requires only that each person be treated as a responsible agent, it is compatible with whatever amount of interference displays a suitable degree of regard for an agent's responsibility. Although the exact level of interference that each argument permits is of course open to debate, neither argument appears to rule out a redistributive scheme that is designed to nullify the great inequalities that an unfettered free market produces, but that otherwise treats persons as responsible agents by allowing all but the most harmful consequences of their decisions to stand. By intervening only to redistribute some of what the talented have gained through activities in which they would have had a strong incentive to engage even if they were somewhat less profitable, the state neither significantly interferes with anyone's freedom to live as he sees fit nor significantly downgrades anyone's status as a responsible agent. Thus, even someone whose commitment to equality is tempered by his acceptance of the choice- and responsibility-related arguments may readily acknowledge that redistributive taxation can be justified on egalitarian grounds.

The other way to see that these arguments do not compel us to accept the prevailing level of inequality is to realize that an economic system that ties reward to contribution in a way that rewards the talented far more than the untalented is called for neither on choice- nor on responsibility-related grounds. On the one hand, such a system is not called for by the choice-related argument because even if living one's own life on one's own terms does require the freedom to make effective choices about risk, consumption, and leisure, having the freedom to make effective choices about these matters does not in turn require that those choices be made against the backdrop of any particular schedule of rewards. On the other hand, a system that rewards workers in proportion to their contributions is also not called for by the responsibility-related argument; for the claim that agents should be allowed to live with the consequences of their responsible choices is neutral about the sort of reward system that must be in place in order to allow agents to *make* responsible choices. Because an economic system that rewards the talented far more than the untalented is not called for by either the choice- or the responsibility-related argument, a proponent of either argument can consistently oppose it. Hence, by this route, too, we are led to conclude that even someone whose commitment to equality is tempered by his acceptance of the choice- or responsibility-related argument can favor a different reward structure on egalitarian grounds.

Despite this necessary concession to the demands of equality, it remains true that the view that has emerged legitimates far more inequality than most luck egalitarians are willing to accept. Because the contested inequalities are those that are due to unchosen differences in talent, it may be objected that accepting the view means abandoning the luck egalitarians' guiding aim of eliminating all inequalities that are due to luck. However, to object to the view on these grounds would be to presuppose a question-begging conception of luck; for my thesis has been precisely that we should enlarge the sphere of choice-related activity to which luck is opposed. Because talents and choices are hopelessly intertwined, I have argued that the proper opposite of luck is not pure choice, but a decidedly impure mix of talent-influenced choices and their sequellae. This is not a rejection of luck egalitarianism; it is luck egalitarianism for human beings.<sup>19</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Here and in what follows, I will use the term "talent" to designate any unchosen ability that has an impact on how well or badly its possessor is capable of performing any task. Although this usage is somewhat broader than the norm—we generally speak of talent only in connection with a restricted range of aesthetic, intellectual, and athletic endeavors—its breadth is appropriate to our project because the activities that affect a person's economic position are also not restricted to these forms of endeavor.

<sup>2</sup> In "What Is Equality? Part II: Equality of Resources," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1981), pp. 283–345, Dworkin sometimes talks as though the key distinction is not between what agents choose (exercise control over, are responsible for) and what they do not, but rather between their (sometimes unchosen) preferences, which are in some relevant sense internal to them, and their powers to implement those preferences, which belong to their external situations. However, given the near-definitional connection between something's being a matter of luck for an agent and its not stemming from his choices, it is hard to reconcile this aspect of Dworkin's position with the prominence that he gives to the project of taming brute luck by transforming it into option luck. More generally, Gerald Cohen has argued at length, and I think convincingly, that "the grounding idea of Dworkin's egalitarianism is that no one should suffer because of brute bad luck and that, since the relevant opposite of an unlucky fate is a fate traceable to its victim's control, my cut [between responsibility and bad luck] is more faithful to Dworkin's grounding idea than the one he ostensibly favors is" (Gerald Cohen, "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice," *Ethics* 99, no. 4 (July 1989), p. 922).

<sup>3</sup> For a clear statement of Cohen's position, see his "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice." For Thomas Nagel's version, see his *Equality and Partiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). For Arneson's version, see the influential series of papers that includes "Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 56 (1989), pp. 77–93, "Liberalism, Distributive Subjectivism, and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 19 (1990), pp. 159–94, "Luck Egalitarianism and the Deserving Poor," *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 4 (1997), pp. 327–350, and "Luck Egalitarianism Interpreted and Defended," *Philosophical Topics* 32, nos. 1 and 2 (Spring and Fall, 2004), pp. 1–20. For an excellent overview of the issues, see Susan Hurley, *Justice, Luck, and Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.



<sup>7</sup> Because my topic is the distinction between choice and talent, I have been stressing the degree to which our choices are shaped by unchosen cognitive abilities that are naturally viewed as talents. However, to focus on these abilities is of course not to deny that our choices are also influenced by many other unchosen aspects of our psychology—by emotional states such as anger or anxiety, traits such as impulsiveness or low tolerance for uncertainty, and so on.

<sup>8</sup> So far, I have discussed only inequalities that arise when two agents make *different* risk-related choices. However, within the luck egalitarian scheme, a just inequality can also arise when two agents make the *same* risk-related choice but one wins his gamble while the other loses. Even if the winner is far more gifted at making such choices than the loser, the sameness of their choices on this occasion means that the difference in their levels of talent has played no role in generating the resulting inequality. For this reason, my observations about the interpenetration of choice and talent do not seem relevant to the luck egalitarian's claim that inequalities of this sort are sometimes just.

<sup>9</sup> For two representative attempts to minimize the range of inequalities that luck egalitarians are committed to tolerating, see Kristin Voigt, "The Harshness Objection: Is Luck Egalitarianism Too Harsh on the Victims of Option Luck?," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol. 10 (2007), pp. 389–407, and Arneson, "Egalitarianism and the Deserving Poor." However, for a contrastingly uncompromising treatment, see Eric Rakowski, *Equal Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Gerald Cohen, "Luck and Equality: A Reply to Hurley," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXXII, no. 2 (March 2006), p. 444.

<sup>11</sup> For an argument that many actual inequalities fall precisely in this intermediate category, see my essay "Real-World Luck Egalitarianism," *Social Philosophy and Policy*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Winter 2010), pp. 218–32.

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of the distinct normative sources of the two main versions of luck egalitarianism, see "Real-World Luck Egalitarianism," sections VI and VII.

<sup>13</sup> An obvious third way of justifying departures from equality is by appealing to the parties' *deserts*—that is, by arguing either that the worse-off deserve their disadvantages or (perhaps) that the better-off deserve their advantages. However, because the notion of desert is arguably fragmented and surely controversial, any argument along these lines would quickly embroil us in a number of difficult disputes. For this reason, I will not pursue this line of thought, but will simply register my confidence that its implications are not likely to differ significantly from those of the arguments that I do pursue.

<sup>14</sup> As Richard Arneson has observed, "if (1) the causation of human choices and attribution of moral responsibility for choices are incompatible and (2) human choices are caused events are both shown to be correct, then luckism folds its tent and luck egalitarianism collapses into one or another version of straight egalitarianism" (Arneson, "Luck Egalitarianism Interpreted and Defended," *Philosophical Topics* 32, Nos. 1 and 2 [Spring and Fall, 2004], p. 9).

<sup>15</sup> For an extended defense of this fact and its implications, see George Sher, *Who Knew? Responsibility Without Awareness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> I add the qualifier "largely" because I do think there is a narrow range of exercises of talent that involve no subordinate choices. If Kobe Bryant has a vertical leap of 38 inches and a journeyman can only jump 28 inches (the NBA average), then the difference in performance that ensues when each player decides to jump as high as he can is entirely due to the difference in their talents and not at all due to any difference in choice.

<sup>17</sup> For two ways of developing the idea that society should seek to eliminate only that proportion of each inequality for which the relevant agents are not responsible, see John E. Roemer, "A Pragmatic Theory of Responsibility for the Egalitarian Planner," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (Spring 1993), vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 146–66, and Peter Vallentyne, "Brute Luck and Responsibility," *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics* vol. 7, no. 1 (2008), pp. 57–80.

<sup>18</sup>This claim would be uncontroversial were it not for the fact that Amartya Sen has denied it. In *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), ch. 1, Sen argues that even Nozick's libertarianism is egalitarian in the sense that Nozick attributes libertarian rights to all persons equally. About this claim, we can say what some might be inclined to say about the view discussed here: with egalitarians like that, who needs inegalitarians?

<sup>19</sup>In the course of writing and revising this paper, I have received helpful comments from Richard Arneson, Baruch Brody, Emily Fox Gordon, Moti Gorin, and Stan Husi.