

The Underrepresentation of Women in Universities: Luck- egalitarianism versus Young's Critique

[Sub-reprezentarea
Femeilor in Universități:
Perspective Teoretice]

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Abstract: *This article looks into two theories and their views on inequality. Dworkin's luck-egalitarianism will be introduced, followed by Young's critique of it and her own theory. These will be used to discuss the under-representation of women in universities using a hypothetical scenario.*

Keywords: *under-representation, luck-egalitarianism, inequalities, structure of the society.*

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1. Introduction

Luck-egalitarianism is a well-developed distributive justice theory, which aims to achieve equality by compensating people for their undeserved bad luck – for example, for being born into a poor family (Ekmekci & Arda, 2015). However, this theory is not free from criticism. Iris Young doesn't directly criticize it, but does argue against some of the principles behind it, advancing her own theory instead. This essay will look at luck-egalitarianism and Young's critique and theory in order to discuss a hypothetical scenario.

Let us imagine that University ABC has discovered that women are grossly under-represented in the academic ranks, despite there being a fairly equal gender distribution among students. To rectify this situation, they will be offering permanent academic staff positions exclusively to women for the next two years. This decision will apply to every available vacancy and will consist of approximately two hundred positions. After the time period has finished, the gender distribution will be reviewed.

After going into each of the two theories, this essay will explain which of them is the best fit to explain the existing under-representation of women in University ABC and what its view on the proposed solution would be.

2. Luck-egalitarianism

Luck-egalitarianism is a theory of distributive justice, which claims that someone's life should be determined, as much as possible, by their own choices, including their ambitions and goals. These choices should not be determined by the circumstances in which people find themselves over which they have no control such as their economic background, race, gender, or disabilities (Arneson, 2018; Rogers, 2000).

The main intuition of luck-egalitarianism is that it is unfair that some people have to live their lives with burdens from unchosen circumstances, while others are not subject to this same fate. Dworkin refers to this as brute luck and argues that inequalities brought about by this should be reduced or eliminated (Arneson, 2018). Advantages caused by brute luck must be equalized. This concept can be understood as an event where, “the agent could not have (reasonably) avoided the possibility of its occurrence”, such as a lightning strike (Vallentyne, 2002, p.532). It is the good or bad fortune that is outside of the individual's control (Arneson, 2018).

In order to understand this brute luck, Dworkin, one of the founding fathers of luck-egalitarianism, devised a thought experiment

involving people ship-wrecked on an island that must divide their resources (Heath, 2004). They each receive 100 seashells to bid on the items that they wish in an auction. Dworkin holds that what is crucial is this fair initial distribution of resources, not the welfare that people may enjoy later on. Given these equal prospects, each person has a responsibility to bear regarding how their life will play out subsequently.

Dworkin claims that the introduction of a hypothetical insurance market could reduce the effects of brute bad luck. This market, which opposes unchosen circumstances, would change brute luck into option luck as everyone would have the opportunity to purchase insurance against a 'handicap'. Hence, it would ensure luck-insensitivity – governments should ensure that a person's fate is not affected by factors outside of their control.

There is a difference between luck and responsibility, however. Dworkin sees the importance of choice-sensitivity (alongside luck-insensitivity), believing that a person's fate should be affected by the choices that they make (Arneson, 2018; Rogers, 2000). This is what 'option luck' refers to. In other words, it is "a matter of how deliberate and calculated gambles turn out – whether someone gains or loses through accepting an isolated risk he or she should have anticipated and *might have declined*." (Vallentyne, 2002, p.533). It is good or bad fortune that is within an individual's control (Arneson, 2018).

In sum, society has the duty to compensate individuals for their undeserved brute bad luck (to reach equality), but this duty disappears when an individual's ill health or situation is caused by their own decisions (Ekmekci & Arda, 2015). If one fell into misfortune by their own faults, that is their own responsibility. Conversely, this applies to good fortune, too – if you worked hard and took gambles with good odds, society cannot take from you what you earned to help the needy (Arneson, 2018). So, the goal is an egalitarian distribution of resources that is choice-sensitive, but luck-insensitive. Dworkin's theory, however, is not free from criticism.

3. Young's critique and her theory

This section will be focused on Young's critique of luck-egalitarianism, diving into her own theory (before reaching an answer to the question set in the introduction).

Debates about equality are usually focused on 'what' our goal should be when trying to achieve it; Young, however, focuses on 'whom' we are discussing when talking about equality. In general, the dominant assumption is that when discussing inequality, we should do so in terms of the

differences between individuals. This is what luck-egalitarianism does, however, Young is opposed to this. She argues that inequality should be assessed through group-conscious measures (i.e. inequalities between groups) by “comparing groups of individuals according to one or more measures of equality” (Young, 2001, p.1).

Young maintains that individual comparison in assessing equality provides little to no basis for claims regarding social justice. Alternatively, when assessing equality through social groups, it is possible to claim that certain inequalities are unjust since one could identify structural inequalities more easily (p.2). Structural inequalities refer to the social processes that are reproduced and reinforced by each other with the result of constraining (or, alternatively, enabling) individual actions. These have a tendency to privilege some groups more than others.

Young does agree with Dworkin that the reason for evaluating inequality is the well-being of individuals. However, comparing individuals (instead of groups) is not as effective in identifying social structures that constrain or enable individual lives beyond their independent control. So, group-measures are crucial in making judgements about justice within the inequalities (p.6).

In other words, claims of justice invoking equality generally need the identification of structural social groups because it is not enough to identify an inequality between individuals as we don't know its causes. It is those causes and consequences that actually raise issues regarding justice (p.7-8).

Taking a further stand against luck-egalitarianism, Young disagrees that inequalities in the distribution of resources or opportunities between individuals are due to luck or choice. Instead, these are actually caused by social institutions. (p.8) These institutions discriminate, exclude and privilege various groups. Only through group-measures can one understand how structures lead to injustices that afford certain groups different degrees of opportunity. One's life circumstances must be considered together when comparing them to another's life as this will unveil a “net of restricting and reinforcing relationships” (p.10).

To better understand what is meant by structural inequality, one can look at the oppression of women. This oppression is grounded in the gender division of labour within the family, which leads to their disadvantage. A woman must care for their child, but will not receive compensation for this. The time and effort necessary to do so will restrict the capacity of women to obtain the same jobs as men, who are not expected to be as involved in the child's life. This, in turn, makes women more dependent on men and,

therefore, creates more unequal power in the family. Further assumptions of this process also help reproduce the unequal structures (p.10-11).

Hence, “structures refer to the relation of basic social positions that fundamentally condition the opportunities and life prospects” of people through processes that mutually reinforce each other (p.14).

To defend her theories from those criticizing her choice to focus on group-measures, Young makes several statements. Firstly, her theory about assessing inequalities regarding structures doesn't contradict the claim that individuals should be the final targets of judgements and policies. Next, she doesn't group individuals arbitrarily, but focuses on those that can have a plausible story for their inequality's causes. Lastly, group measures don't suppress individual variations in a group, but she argues that some people have unequal opportunities caused by structural inequalities (p.17).

Although explaining how to find unjust inequalities, Young doesn't provide specific strategies for remedies. Undermining structural inequalities could be done through group targeted policies (e.g. affirmative action), depending on the circumstances (p.18).

4. The under-representation of women

Returning to the hypothetical scenario provided in the introduction, this essay argues that Young's approach would be better equipped to understand the under-representation of women in permanent academic staff positions.

Her approach, using group-measures, would not only identify the existing structural inequality, but deem it unjust. This would be as a result of analyzing the causes and consequences of the under-representation of women. Making reference to the example given above, one could argue that there are fewer women in academic positions because historically women were expected to stay at home with the children – therefore a result of their social position. Hiring only women for a specified period of time could help to resolve this unjust inequality in academic positions.

Luck-egalitarians may also agree that the gender gap in the academic positions is unjust, but it is less clear. If a man and a woman with the same skills and experience apply to the job, but the man gets it because of discrimination, that is unjust. This inequality of opportunity may warrant affirmative action, where only women are hired. However, according to Pierik (2006, p.426), Dworkin's endorsement of “affirmative action cannot be interpreted as a requirement of justice’.

Moreover, other scholars criticize this theory, arguing that it is “problematic when dealing with structural aspects of gender inequality” (Kim, 2010, p.67). Kim (2010) argues that even if equality would be achieved (according to Dworkin’s criteria), the injustice of gender inequality that is present in our society would still exist. This is because it would fail to conceptualize women’s unequal situation at work as a structural problem – as a socially created gender inequality. In this aspect, Young’s theory is superior. Kim (2010) states that the distinction between luck and choice does not account for socially-imposed oppression, which is a crucial part of equality.

In other words, Dworkin’s theory fails to see that someone’s choices must be placed into the context of their environment and social structures of power (Kim, 2010). What this brings to mind is an example made of two scenarios. 1) a woman does not get offered the permanent academic position due to discrimination (prior to the hypothetical new policy at University ABC). This is unjust according to luck-egalitarianism because her gender is a form of brute luck. 2) A woman does not get offered the job because she chose not to apply for it. This is not unjust because it was her own choice. If this was the case for all the women, their under-representation would not be unjust. However, this view fails to consider why that woman may not have applied for the job – the cause (that Young would identify through group-measures). Perhaps the woman has seen a pattern and knows that a man is more likely to get the job or perhaps she feels unsafe in an environment made up of mostly men.

Due to the above-mentioned reasons, this essay argues that Young’s approach would be better equipped to explain the under-representation of women at University ABC and would most likely see the solution proposed by the University as a good first step in solving the structural inequality.

5. Conclusion

This essay has compared two theories – luck-egalitarianism and Young’s theory – in order to see which would be better able to explain a hypothetical scenario regarding a gender gap in academic employees at a university. It was found that Young’ theory would be better in this case. Her theory uses group-conscious measures of evaluating inequalities to determine if they were caused by societal structures and if they are, therefore, unjust.

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