

# FREEDOM OF OPPORTUNITY, NOT EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

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*by*

George Reisman



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## FREEDOM OF OPPORTUNITY, NOT EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

**T**he advocates of economic equality have a fallback position, which they also frequently use as a camouflage, namely, the doctrine of “equality of opportunity.” They do not, they say, advocate anything so foolish or so extreme as the imposition of actual economic equality. All they advocate, they say, is that everyone have an equal chance—that, as they put it, all the runners begin the race from the same starting line. On this basis, they feel free to advocate the confiscation of inheritances, public education through the postgraduate level, and laws preventing private discrimination on the basis not only of such factors as race, religion or national origin, but also age, medical condition, and physical handicap.

The supporters of the equality of opportunity doctrine view opportunities as fundamentally external to the individual—in effect, as various dishes carried by waiters on trays, which, under capitalism, are arbitrarily served to some and withheld from others. They want the government to seize control, they say, not of the distribution of wealth and income, but merely of the distribution of these dishes, as it were—that is, of the opportunities to earn wealth and income—and so give everyone an equal chance.

To most people, the equality-of-opportunity doctrine sounds eminently fair and reasonable. But, in fact, it is as much against the nature of reality as is the doctrine of the out-and-out equality of wealth and income. This becomes clear as soon as we look beyond the inheritance of wealth and begin to consider other external factors that affect the opportunities an individual has.

For example, consider such factors as the intelligence of a child’s parents, their education and vocabulary, their system of values, and their love for him and treatment of him, not to mention their level of income and the kind of material life they lead and thereby expose him to while he is growing up. It is certainly arguable that differences in these factors confront a child with differences in opportunities that are of no less significance for his future life, including his ability to earn wealth and income, than those which are based on the wealth he may or may not inherit.

To create equality of opportunity with respect to these factors, nothing less would be necessary than to abolish the institution of the family and to raise all children in government orphanages, where they could all be brought up in exactly the same way. This, of course, was the idea of Plato, and it was

supported by many socialists in the nineteenth century and earlier in this century.

But even this would not be enough to achieve equality of opportunity. Because even if all these environmental factors could be made the same, there would still remain enormous differences in the intellectual and physical endowment of the child himself, based on his genetic inheritance. A highly intelligent, strong, and beautiful child, for example, automatically has enormous advantages over a stupid, weak, and ugly child that is given the same upbringing. How can such different children, and the adults they later become, be given equality of opportunity?

One possible answer to this question is that the government should concentrate more heavily on the upbringing of the less fortunate, thus, perhaps raising their intelligence, improving their strength, and possibly even their looks. But no amount of such extra effort by the government can significantly make up for what nature has denied. Thus, another possible answer is that the government should insist that such differences simply be disregarded. The first answer manifests itself today in large-scale government support for special programs for the education of the retarded; the second, in those anti-discrimination laws, such as California's, which prohibit discrimination in employment based on medical condition or physical handicap.

A third possible answer is that, failing the government's ability to create equality of opportunity by raising up the less fortunate, it should tear down the more fortunate. If it cannot make the stupid intelligent, the weak strong, and the ugly beautiful, it can find a way to hamper or destroy intelligence, strength, and beauty, and so achieve equality of opportunity by making everyone stupid, weak, and ugly. It may be difficult to find anyone who would openly advocate such a policy, but it does follow logically from the goal of equality of opportunity.

There is a fourth conceivable answer: the government should attempt to determine the genetic endowment of children. It could enact a program of eugenics, and attempt to breed children who would all possess the same characteristics at birth. Then, with the same upbringing as well, the demand for equality of opportunity could, apparently, at last be satisfied.

These absurd and vicious implications of the equality of opportunity doctrine should make one begin to wonder what kind of ideal "equality of opportunity" really is. In reality, it is not a legitimate ideal at all. It appears to represent justice only on the basis of a thoroughly confused view of the nature of opportunities and the causes of human success.

Let us consider what opportunities actually are, and then establish some important facts about them.

An opportunity is merely *an occasion on which successful action is possible*. It is a situation that an individual can take advantage of to his gain.

## FREEDOM OF OPPORTUNITY

What needs to be realized about opportunities is, first of all, that there is no scarcity of them; they arise again and again. The second thing that needs to be understood is that what is important in connection with them and deserves to be fought for, as a matter both of justice and universal self-interest, is not that vicious absurdity “the equality of opportunity” but *the freedom of opportunity*. What the freedom of opportunity means and why it is so important will be explained shortly. Finally, what needs to be understood about opportunities is that they can be and regularly are *created* by individuals. Indeed, opportunities are themselves products of human thought and action. Just how they are is something that will also be explained shortly.

Let us consider the abundance of opportunities. An opportunity exists every time there is the possibility of improving oneself in any way. If one is penniless and there is an unfilled job available that one has the ability to fill, one has the opportunity of ending one’s pennilessness. If one has a job, and there is any better job available that one has the ability to fill, one has the opportunity to improve one’s position further. If there is any skill that one does not possess, but is capable of learning, then one has the opportunity of adding to one’s skills.

In fact, in the nature of the case, the economic opportunities potentially open to the individual far exceed his ability to exploit them, with the result that he must *choose* among them, selecting some and rejecting others. This follows from the fact that there is always room for improvement in the satisfaction of man’s wants, and that the basis for carrying out such improvement is the performance either of more labor or of more productive labor. In other words, built into the fact that man’s wants can always be satisfied more fully or better is the opportunity for the performance of more labor as the means of satisfying them more fully or better, and the opportunity for improving the productivity of his labor.

Indeed, on the basis of what has been established earlier in this book, in Chapter 2, it follows that in the nature of things *there are potentially limitless opportunities both for increasing employment and for raising the productivity of labor*, for there are virtually limitless possibilities for improvement in the satisfaction of man’s wants. Indeed, the potential opportunities for employment always dwarf man’s ability actually to work, which is the major reason that he must be concerned with raising the productivity of his labor.

People may wonder, of course, how it can be true that there are virtually limitless employment opportunities and yet, at the same time, the world in which we live is characterized by chronic mass unemployment and the experience of millions is that they have no opportunity for work. There is a simple reconciliation of these facts. Namely, misguided laws and social institutions deny man the freedom of exploiting the opportunities for employment that the nature of reality offers him, and so force unemployment upon