
[This is the final draft of a review that will be published in the *Journal of Moral Philosophy*]

*Luck egalitarianism* is meant to be “an advanced introduction to its topic” (p. xii), but it is much more than this: Lippert-Rasmussen’s most recent book does not only provide a clear and comprehensive examination of luck egalitarianism, but it also contains several novel and interesting ideas which strengthen the luck egalitarian view.

The book starts out with an analysis of the key features of luck egalitarianism, whose core claim is defined as follows: “it is unjust if some people are worse off than others through their bad luck” (p.1). Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to the analysis of the two elements – equality and luckism – which form the luck egalitarian pattern, that is, *how* luck egalitarians think benefits and burdens ought to be distributed; Chapter 4 investigates the currency question, namely: *what* are the relevant goods that a society ought to distribute. Chapter 5 analyses the theoretical difference between telic and deontic egalitarianism. Chapter 6 examines the question of the scope of luck egalitarianism, while Chapter 7 critically assesses the debate between social relations egalitarians and luck egalitarians. Finally, Chapter 8 interrogates whether luck egalitarianism can conflict with other important values.

The book deals with a large range of complex issues, which cannot all be covered in such a short book review. Therefore, I will focus on only two aspects of Lippert-Rasmussen’s discussion which I find problematic.

The first is to be found in Chapter 2, where Lippert-Rasmussen is concerned with the question of basic equality. Luck egalitarians maintain that once an egalitarian benchmark is presupposed, the only justified deviations from it are those which are due to people’s choice or
responsibility. But why, some may question, is the baseline egalitarian in the first place? What is the justification for this presumption in favour of equality? To answer this question, one must find a property, which is morally relevant and equally possessed, that determines why persons should be treated according to egalitarian principles of justice.

After critically surveying some of the most prominent perspectives on this matter, such as those advanced by Bernard Williams, John Rawls, and Ian Carter, Lippert-Rasmussen puts forward his own view. First, he rightly points out that it is important to distinguish two questions that are sometimes run together. On the one hand, there is the question of moral standing: “in virtue of which properties do all persons have (i) equal moral standing and (ii) a moral standing which is different from that of non-persons?” (p. 48); on the other hand, there is the question of equal treatment “why is it desirable that persons with equal moral standing are treated equally or are equally well off in the absence of considerations about differential responsibility that motivates unequal treatment or inequality?” (pp. 48-49)

Once it has been shown that these are two conceptually different questions, it becomes clear that the first is not an issue for egalitarians alone; rather, it is a problem with which most (although not all) theories of distributive justice must deal. This is good news for egalitarians; after all, as someone once said, “two in distress make sorrow less”. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we can leave the question of moral standing unanswered. Acknowledging that this theoretical gap must be filled, Lippert-Rasmussen argues that “equality of moral standing of persons is grounded in their capacity to be non-instrumentally concerned with things in a distinctive way, say, one that involves long-term planning” (p. 51). This answer, however, does not seem convincing, and it is surprising that Lippert-Rasmussen thinks it is, since, as he recognizes, his view looks very much like Williams’s position according to which the basis of moral equality is the capacity of self-awareness possessed by all human beings (p. 51). This suggests that the same problems which, Lippert-Rasmussen rightly observes, undermine
Williams’s view can similarly be applied to his own account (pp. 41-42). First, there are clear cases of human beings who do not have this capacity; and cases of human beings who, despite having had this capacity, have lost it. These human beings, then, have no moral standing. This is problematic for those who believe that all human beings should have moral status. Second, and more importantly, this capacity is scalar, which means that it comes in degrees. It is hard to see how *equal* moral status can be grounded in a scalar capacity: why do those who have a more developed capacity not have a superior moral status? Lippert-Rasmussen’s view is unable to escape these objections and, consequently, it does not seem to represent a satisfactory answer to the question of the basis of moral equality.

Furthermore, one may argue that the underlying methodological rationale which motivates Lippert-Rasmussen’s view is also inappropriate. In agreement with Carter, Lippert-Rasmussen maintains that “our answer to the question of equal standing constrains our answer to the ‘Equality of what’ question. So, for instance, if we think the basis of equal moral standing is the capacity to experience pain and pleasure, it would be odd to think that causing pain or pleasure are irrelevant to wrong- or right-making features” (p. 51). This, I believe, is correct; however, unlike Lippert-Rasmussen, I do not think the opposite is true (p. 51): our answer to the “Equality of what” question cannot constrain our answer to the question of equal moral standing. The latter is the basic question because (i) it determines the range of subjects to which principles of justice apply and, in so doing, (ii) it informs the content of principles of justice, precisely because this must be related to the reason as to why those particular subjects are entitled to justice in the first place – it would be odd to think that causing pain or pleasure is relevant in defining principles of justice which govern the conduct of entities that do not have such a capacity.

In chapter 7, Lippert-Rasmussen introduces the most important competitor to luck egalitarianism as the best conception of egalitarian justice, namely: social relations
egalitarianism. Proponents of this view generally maintain that “a society is just if, and only if, individuals within it relate to another as equals” (p. 179). Lippert-Rasmussen presents and rejects some of the objections that social egalitarians have pressed against luck egalitarianism. I want to focus on his discussion of the harshness objection.

According to this objection, luck egalitarianism is an implausible view because it accepts severe deprivation and serious inequalities as long as these are not due to brute luck. Lippert-Rasmussen believes that this objection does not show that luck egalitarianism should be rejected; rather, it only shows that it is an indeterminate view (p. 189). I agree with the first part of this statement, but I disagree with the second: it seems to me that the harshness objection does not only prove that luck egalitarianism is indeterminate, but it also demonstrates that it is incomplete. Let me explain why.

Lippert-Rasmussen convincingly notes that luck egalitarians are only committed to holding that if an individual is worse off through fault of her own, then this inequality is justified from a distributive justice point of view; consequently, luck egalitarians leave open the question as to how worse off one can become through the exercise of her choice or responsibility. In this respect, luck egalitarianism is indeed an indeterminate view. However, this indeterminateness can only be solved by setting a threshold which limits how worse off a person can be permitted to become. But it is doubtful that this threshold can be grounded in the value of fairness, so in luck egalitarianism itself: what it seems reasonable to argue, then, is that the harshness objection shows that luck egalitarianism is an incomplete view, for the aim of neutralizing (or mitigating) luck is only a component of what distributive justice requires. An appeal to value pluralism within distributive justice appears to be the only way of rescuing luck egalitarianism from the harshness objection. Such a rescue, however, comes at the cost of acknowledging that luck egalitarianism is not the whole story about distributive justice, but only a part (albeit important) of it. To be sure, this may not be a problem for Lippert-
Rasmussen’s view, since he acknowledges that luck egalitarianism is not a complete view of distributive justice (p. 3). But the point stands: the harshness objection may be more pressing than Lippert-Rasmussen seems to concede.

Despite these criticisms, I would like to conclude by re-emphasizing the great merits of this book: first, it provides the reader with a thorough synopsis of luck egalitarianism, which succeeds in combining breadth in scope and depth in analysis. Second, it puts forward some convincing arguments which bolster the luck egalitarian position: the reader will find the discussions of different types of luck and of the difference between telic and deontic egalitarianism especially interesting. Finally, the book also deals with relatively unexplored questions such as: should egalitarians be concerned with (in)equality among groups or among individuals, and what is owed to those agents who are neither persons nor human beings.

For these reasons, *Luck Egalitarianism* is an essential reading for anyone who wants to be acquainted with one of the most criticized, yet persuasive, theories of egalitarian justice.

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