

Introduction

For a long time, researchers interested in studying inequality in economic opportunities within countries, as well as its variation across countries, only did it indirectly, by focusing on economic mobility across generations (see, e.g., Corak 2006; Mitnik et al. 2018; Solon 1999). The study of economic mobility—in particular, the estimation of intergenerational income and earnings elasticities, or IGEs—was explicitly or implicitly motivated by the notion that (im)mobility levels provide information on how (un)equal opportunities are.¹ At least in part, this focus on mobility was a response to the greater conceptual, methodological and practical difficulties involved in theorizing and measuring inequality of opportunity compared to mobility.

Over the last 15 years, however, things have changed significantly, as a large, sophisticated and influential empirical literature on inequality of opportunity (IOp) has developed quite independently from the mobility literature. In terms of philosophical foundations, this new literature has mostly adopted the “luck egalitarian” understanding of IOp (e.g., Dworkin 1981a, 1981b; Arneson 1989; Cohen 1989; Roemer 1998), which puts individual responsibility front and center in the normative assessment of inequality. The various theories of justice in the luck-egalitarian family stress the ethical imperative of counteracting the distributive effects of luck on people’s incomes and other outcomes (e.g., health status, educational attainment). As luck is often interpreted as the opposite of what individuals are responsible for (e.g., Cohen 2006:442), luck egalitarianism has been also called “responsibility-sensitive egalitarianism.”²

Luck egalitarians argue that income and other outcomes are determined by factors that are beyond individuals’ responsibility, usually referred as “circumstances” (e.g., gender, race, socioeconomic background), and by factors for which individuals should be held responsible, often referred as “effort” (e.g., number of hours worked, educational attainment, occupational choice). Inequalities due to differences in circumstances are deemed ethically unacceptable whereas those arising from differences in effort are considered just, but only as long as they cannot be traced back to differences in circumstances.³ Therefore, for any outcome of interest, the luck-egalitarian normative ideal is an outcome distribution where efforts are rewarded adequately (the “reward principle”) and the effect of circumstances is fully compensated for (the “compensation principle”). In this ideal context, all existing disparities are due to effort differentials not accounted by circumstances.

There are two different interpretations of the compensation principle. In the *ex-post view*, the principle requires equalizing outcomes among people exerting the same level of effort but subject to different circumstances. In the *ex-ante view*, it requires equalizing people’s opportunity sets. IOp has typically been

¹ An exact account of the relationship between these two pairs of complementary concepts, however, has only been provided very recently (Mitnik, Bryant and Weber 2019:387-388).

² This characterization glosses over important qualifications regarding the notion of luck that is relevant here. For a detailed analysis of this notion and its role in luck-egalitarianism, see Lippert-Rasmussen (2018).

³ This position, which requires that effort be “cleaned from any contamination coming from circumstances” (Jusot, Tubeuf and Trannoy 2013), is due to Roemer (e.g., 1998) and is the one dominant in empirical work. For alternative philosophical positions on this matter, see Barry (2005) and Swift (2005).

