EQUALITY FOR INEGALITARIANS

This book offers a new and compelling account of distributive justice and its relation to choice. Unlike luck egalitarians, who treat unchosen differences in people's circumstances as sources of unjust inequality to be overcome, Sher views such differences as pervasive and unavoidable features of the human situation. Appealing to an original account of what makes us moral equals, he argues that our interest in successfully negotiating life's ever-shifting contingencies is more basic than our interest in achieving any more specific goals. He argues, also, that the state's obligation to promote this interest supports a principled version of the view that what matters about resources, opportunity, and other secondary goods is only that each person have enough. The book opens up a variety of new questions, and offers a distinctive new perspective for scholars of political theory and political philosophy, and for those interested in distributive justice and luck egalitarianism.

GEORGE SHER is Herbert S. Autrey Professor of Philosophy at Rice University. His publications include *Desert* (1987), *Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics* (Cambridge, 1997), and *Who Knew? Responsibility without Awareness* (2009).

EQUALITY FOR INEGALITARIANS

GEORGE SHER

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107009578

First published 2014

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data
Sher, George.
Equality for Inegalitarians / George Sher.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-00957-8 (hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-25170-9 (pbk.)
1. Distributive justice. 2. Equality. I. Title.
HB523.S5325 2014
340´.115 – dc23 2014021795

ISBN 978-1-107-00957-8 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-25170-9 Paperback

Contents

Preface

In Houston, where I live, my favorite supermarket is located near a halfway house. Its residents dot the neighborhood, and one has a regular place outside the market. He's a damaged person, confined to a wheelchair, and he spends a lot of time staring at the ground. Sometimes, though, I see him in conversation with the security guard. He's not too damaged to have a life.

What kind of life? It's a mystery to me, and I wonder about it often. There must be things he likes, little treats, and he must have some kind of social world complete with intrigues, slights, and a complicated pecking order. But life in a wheelchair looks hard, certainly because of restriction and dependency, perhaps also because of discomfort and/or shame. Are his consolations restricted to drink and drugs? Does he read? *Can* he read? What does the future look like to him?

His is, I'm sure, not an easy life. But is it also an unjust life – one that, in a more just society, would be different and better? Has his government failed him by allowing him to live as he does?

Philosophers have proposed many theories that address this question, and with this book I join their ranks. When I began, the book's aim and scope were relatively modest. I have long been attracted to the ideal of equal opportunity, and like many others, I had come to regard the view known as luck egalitarianism – very roughly, that inequalities are just if and only if they are due to the parties' choices rather than luck – as an attractive elaboration of that ideal. However, at the same time, it seemed to me that luck egalitarianism raised deep analytical and normative problems that had not been recognized, much less resolved, by its proponents. Thus, at the outset, my aim was simply to bring to light, and if possible to resolve, the most important

of these neglected problems. By doing this, I hoped to produce an improved and defensible version of luck egalitarianism.

But that's not what happened; for the more I thought about why a person's choices should affect what he ought to have, the more I became convinced that we cannot make sense of this without abandoning several key elements of luck egalitarianism. More specifically, I came to believe that we cannot account for the normative significance of choice – the luck egalitarian's fundamental insight – without assigning new and radically different roles to both equality and luck.

Here is the short version of the view at which I arrived. I now believe that the reason people should be allowed to enjoy or suffer the consequences of their choices is not that they are responsible for those outcomes (although they often are), but rather that no one can genuinely live a life of his own unless his decisions have a real impact on his fortunes. I believe, as well, that given our unique relation to our own lives, the non-comparative facts about a person's life are morally more important than whether he fares better or worse than others. For this reason, I take the distributive implications of the moral equality of persons to be considerably more complex than is generally supposed. And, finally, given what is involved in living a characteristically human life, I view the innumerable contingencies that differentiate each person's situation from those of others not as so many sources of unjust inequality to be neutralized by society, but rather as the backdrop in whose absence we could not live recognizably human lives at all.

Because this is a work of philosophy, my defense of these claims, and of the larger account of distributive justice of which they are elements, is pitched at a rather high level of abstraction. However, because the problem the account is intended to solve is very much a human one, it is natural to want to bring the discussion back to earth. What does an outlook like mine imply about the abundant misery and gross disparities of wealth by which we are surrounded? What, in particular, do they imply about the man in the wheelchair?

To this last question, the quick answer is that I cannot know because I don't know *him*. However, even allowing for this, some things can be said. No less than any luck egalitarian, I believe it would

be relevant to know whether the man's poverty and disability are the result of certain headstrong or careless choices he made when he was younger, or whether, instead, he was born with a congenital condition that left him unemployable, or awoke one morning to find that the economy simply had no place for him. However, unlike many luck egalitarians, I don't think this question is decisive in either direction. On the one hand, because lives are lived over time, whatever case there is for allowing the consequences of the man's earlier choices to play themselves out must be tempered by the need to preserve his ability to shape the later parts of his life. On the other, even if his economic options were from the beginning more limited than those of others, their impact on his overall ability to shape his life remains a further question. Because our lives are bounded by ever-changing sets of contingent circumstances – because different people are born in different areas, exposed to different influences, meet different others, acquire different information, and so on without end – no single element of a person's circumstances can be decisive in determining what sorts of lives are open to him. Thus, while it may well be true that our man is owed far more than our social arrangements have managed to deliver, the injustice, if it exists, is no simple function of the disadvantages that so readily elicit our sympathy, concern, and guilt.

In the course of writing this book, I have accumulated a variety of intellectual debts, and it is a pleasure to acknowledge these here. Those who commented helpfully on different parts of the book, or who made useful suggestions in discussions of its topics, include Richard Arneson, Baruch Brody, Anthony Carreras, Mark Fleurbeay, Moti Gorin, Stan Husi, Simon Keller, Steven Macedo, Kristi Olson, Allen Patton, Lisa Rasmussen, Adina Roskies, Larry Temkin, Andrew Williams, and Hector Wittwer. I also received useful comments from the members of a number of audiences, from a thoughtful clearance reviewer for Cambridge University Press, and from the members of a particularly productive seminar at Rice University who discussed much of this material in draft form: Dan Burkett, Chris Dohna, Beth Hupfer, Sherry Kao, Carissa Phillips-Garrett, Victor Saenz, Graham Valenta, Brandon Williams, and Peter Zuk. I had the privilege of

spending the 2011–12 academic year in the stimulating environment of the Princeton University Center for Human Values, and I gratefully acknowledge both the support that I received there and the research leave from Rice that made my visit possible. Some of the material in Chapter 3 originally appeared in *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 27, 1 (Winter 2010) under the title "Real-World Luck Egalitarianism."

As always, my greatest debt is to my wife Emily Fox Gordon. In addition to providing her usual invaluable stylistic advice, she was tireless in reassuring me that the world needs not only another book on equality, but this book in particular. I still don't know if that's true, but there's no one I trust more, so maybe it is.