Choice-egalitarianism and the paradox of the baseline: a reply to Manor

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In 'Choice-egalitarianism and the paradox of the baseline' (2003) I proposed a paradox pertaining to choice-egalitarianism (CE), the dominant philosophical view of egalitarianism. In his ingenious response, Tal Manor (2005) uses my *reductio* argument against my own argument.

I made two claims against CE. First, that under careful analysis, CE compels us to bring about states of affairs so unacceptable that the position becomes absurd. By virtue of its very conceptual structure, CE gives us manifestly wrong instructions. Second, that CE's hope of reconciling a strong egalitarianism with robust personal choice and something like the prevailing market economy is a chimera. Manor's paper does not dispute my second claim. Indeed, his own claim, that in fact CE leads to something close to strict equality, supports my pessimism about CE's reconciliation project. My reply to Manor therefore focuses on his denial of my first claim, that choice-egalitarianism leads to absurdity.

According to CE, the moral baseline is equality, and the only way of justifying inequality is if it results from one's free choice: people may not be worse off than others, unless their being worse off results from their free choice. My essay pointed out a category of persons that choice-egalitarians neglect, and I named them Non-Effectives (NEs): persons who, owing to severe physical handicaps or similar disadvantages, have no income-generating abilities in a market economy, and who thus lack the ability to affect their own income or resources through their choices. I claimed that CE would require that all NEs ought to be indexed to the person who has the highest income (call him 'Bill Gates'), for otherwise any NE would have a much lower income than Bill Gates through no choice or fault of her own.[1] This conclusion leads to various absurdities. For example, choice-egalitarianism penalizes choice and brings about huge inequalities, because NEs, who make no pertinent choices, will automatically earn as much as Gates does, while hardworking, productive people are unlikely to come even close. In fact, CE forces these hard workers to finance the incredible wealth that the NEs would thereby acquire.

Manor embraces my move against CE, but claims that once the income gap becomes sufficiently large, we all begin to exhibit Non-Effective features. A person may be at fault for not earning ten percent more than, or even double, her normal earnings, since through hard work and perseverance she could perhaps increase her earnings to that level. She could not, however, come to earn a hundred times her present income, let alone as much as Bill Gates. The average person, 'normally not an NE, becomes a partial (or relative) NE compared to Gates, regardless of his motivation and responsibility' (Manor 2005: 267). Hence,

> [W]e've reached the conclusion that according to CE, most average people should make as much money as Bill Gates does. Since obviously we do not have enough financial resources to pay everyone (in real terms) as much as Gates, we need to reduce Gates's salary to an average level, say by taxing him. This is certainly not an absurd conclusion for egalitarians. (2005: 267)

I reply that Manor hasn't succeeded in making a case for the claim that most people ought to be (like the NEs) indexed to Bill Gates. Furthermore, in those cases where indexing to Bill Gates *is* required, this will not have a very large egalitarian impact on the height of the baseline, and it will only contribute to the *reductio* effect, showing CE to have even *more* absurd implications than my focus on the NEs exhibited.

Before I examine Manor's 'universalization' of Non-Effectiveness, I want to set the stage for the discussion. When we consider a model choice-

[1] In fact, as I argued there, the top baseline may even lie with Highest Potential Income (roughly, what Gates would earn were he to make every effort) rather than mere actual Highest Income. But for our purposes, the second suffices.

egalitarian society, we need to think, first, of a modern Western society. Then we need to consider a much improved version of such a society, one that offers a much larger measure of equality of opportunity. For instance, the role of inheritance will be marginalized (for whether there is money for one to inherit from one's family is not up to one), and educational opportunities will be accessible to all. Another constraint is that we must assume a large measure of free will, at least of the compatibilist kind. CE itself of course depends on a robust sense of free will, otherwise it would collapse into 'no-choice egalitarianism'. Finally, we obviously do not want to consider people at (say) age 60, where typically most of their income-determining choices are behind them, but only when people are at a younger age.

Given such an ideal CE framework, it seems to me that an average person will have a very large measure of responsibility for his or her location on the income scale.

The reality of this emphasis on responsibility prevails to a large extent even in contemporary Western societies, although they are far from being ideal in CE terms. The income of most people is significantly affected by their free choices. The exercise of guessing what their income might have been, counterfactually, has severe limitations. This does not matter much, however, for most people do not make even the most *elementary* decisions that might conceivably lead them to a high income, even though making such decisions is clearly up to them. Almost any reader of *Analysis* could have become a lawyer or a stockbroker rather than a philosopher, professional directions that are, as a rule, better for those whose highest preference is to increase their income. Going into business for oneself is another way of reaching a high-income bracket. By contrast, most people prefer the relative safety of a salaried income. Moreover, most people who do set up a business of their own wish to make a good living out of it but do not continuously strive to enlarge it (say, open more branches). Then there is the issue of savings. Most people (a) do not save as much as they can from their income but rather spend it, and (b) using their savings, they do not make serious efforts to understand and choose among the more lucrative areas of risky investment in stocks and options, but prefer much safer, relatively risk-averse, investments.

Note that income is not correlated with some esoteric trait or capacity. Being a first-class concert pianist may require native abilities unavailable to most people, but the people who have become wealthy in a self-made way do not exhibit any such endowed characteristic: in fact, they differ widely, in almost every respect. When we explore the rise to the top of the (self-made) wealthy, we find little in common except a will to become rich, a willingness to take risky choices, and a willingness to work extremely hard in a direction that promises high income. Almost none of the rest of us share such levels of willingness. Nor do we choose to try to change ourselves into such people.

It is reasonable to think that many things are much more important than fabulous wealth. Self-development, professional fulfilment, contributing to a worthwhile profession or pursuit, spending time with family and friends, knowledge and wisdom, the appreciation of beauty, or taking time off for relaxation and contemplation, are high on the list. Hence a person whose dominant desire is to amass more and more wealth need not be envied. However, given that almost all the rest of us have not seriously entertained that desire (as can be seen clearly by examining our pertinent choices and actions), we do not even begin to be candidates for compensation, according to CE. Like people who want to speak a foreign language but who never bother to go and study it, or like people who fantasize about a sporting career while sitting all day on the sofa and switching TV channels, we have no choice-related basis for complaining that we are not wealthy.

In my original paper I focused on the most extreme category of persons who lack the pertinent choices, the Non-Effectives. As Manor notes, I did mention 'partial NEs', but I did not further discuss such more messy examples. Given that most people do not deserve to be included in the indexing process, and hence that the top baseline will remain very high, the idea of indexing the non-productive NEs to Bill Gates suffices to establish the absurdity of choice-egalitarianism. I spelled out the issue this way in the original article. I am happy, however, to consider a few instances in addition to the NEs.

Warren Buffett is currently worth over 40 billion dollars, still a few billion dollars short of Bill Gates's worth. Buffett's wealth began with his small earnings as a newspaper boy delivering newspapers in his neighbourhood, and he in time multiplied them through his wise choices in investments. Surely his history sufficiently indicates that he has continuously made every effort to acquire more money, and yet he falls billions of dollars behind Bill Gates. No matter: choice-egalitarianism mandates that we top him up.[2] Prioritarian philosophers, and those who favour sufficientism, would put Buffett at the end of the queue, but choice-egalitarianism stresses that inequality that does not result from possible choices deserves to be corrected. On this basis, few persons have a stronger case than that supreme striver and chooser, Buffett.

Similarly, there must be some money-obsessed entrepreneurs who have done *all* that they could to follow the direction taken by Bill Gates. Let

[2] As Manor reminds us, Bill Gates has contributed billions of dollars to charity, and this as well should be added to the difference between Gates and Buffett. So Buffett too can decide what he would like to do with this extra increment to his wealth.

us call one such person *Gill Bates*. Since Gill Bates has done all that is humanly possible to accumulate wealth (she is a multimillionaire many times over) yet is far poorer than Bill Gates merely as a result of brute luck beyond the control of her choice, she too must be helped up. The resources for topping up Buffett, Gill Bates, and the NEs to Bill Gates's level would then come from taxing everyone, including ordinary hard-working people.

To conclude. I had argued that, according to choice-egalitarianism, since Non-Effectives lack the pertinent choices, they cannot receive less than the wealthiest person, Bill Gates. Tal Manor's response argues that almost all of us cannot receive less than Bill Gates. I claim to have shown here that his response is not convincing, even today, and that his attempted refutation would be even less applicable in an ideal CE society. To some extent, we can apply the CE rule of 'Index to Bill Gates' beyond persons who are NEs, but the targets for such equalization would largely lie among the atypical cases – Warren Buffett and the Gill Bates's of this world – not the common man or woman. And that, surely, does not make choice-egalitarianism morally (or, indeed, pragmatically) more appealing.[3]

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References

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