**Abstract:** Ronald Dworkin was one of the twentieth century’s leading legal and political philosophers, having published extensively on justice, rights, the nature of the law, abortion and euthanasia, freedom of speech, and democracy. In this entry, I focus on the core aspect of Dworkin’s contribution to debates about social justice, specifically his account of equality of resources.

Ronald Dworkin (1931-2013) was one of the twentieth century’s leading legal and political philosophers, having published extensively on justice, rights, the nature of the law, abortion and euthanasia, freedom of speech, and democracy. Central to his writings is the idea that we must approach apparently disparate phenomena in a unified way, emphasising how truths about personal ethics, morality, politics, and the law are all part of a grand theory of value (Dworkin 2011). On this view, moral and political ideals such as dignity, liberty, equality, and democracy do not stand in conflict. Instead, properly understood, these concepts mutually support the same account of how members of a political community should live together.

At the heart of Dworkin’s philosophical outlook is the claim that an individual lives her life well only if she lives with dignity. This has two components: self-respect and authenticity. Self-respect demands of an individual that she act from the conviction that it is objectively important that her life is lived well – that her life is a success, rather than a failure (Dworkin 2011: 205-209). Authenticity requires an individual’s self-expression: she must seek a way to live that she see can endorse as appropriate to her, given her circumstances (Dworkin 2011: 209-214).

Dworkin believes that, though self-respect and authenticity are necessary conditions on living well, these ideas also inform our principles of morality. In particular, if living well requires of an individual that she act from the conviction that her life is objectively important, then, since this must be true for every person, we arrive at the conclusion that everyone else’s life is as important as one’s own (Dworkin 2011: 255-260). And, if living well demands self-expression, then we ought to empower individuals to determine their own goals. Precisely how these claims should influence our evaluation of rival moral principles is a tricky issue that Dworkin addresses at length, though I shall set these matters aside (Dworkin 2011: chs 11-14).

At the level of political morality, Dworkin believes that a concern for self-respect and authenticity generates the conclusion that states must display equal concern and respect for the lives of their members. This means that states must not treat some members’ lives as more important than others; and, it must empower and protect each member to determine her own goals. What does this require in practice? Dworkin’s answer is a conception of social justice that he calls equality of resources. This is the leading liberal egalitarian alternative to John Rawls’s justice as fairness (see RAWLS, JOHN), and it is this aspect of Dworkin’s thought on which I focus in the remainder of this entry.
I. Equality of Welfare

I begin by examining Dworkin's critique of welfare egalitarianism from which his preferred view emerges. Welfarists claim that whether institutions are just (or otherwise justifiable) depends partly on the way in which they distribute welfare between individuals (see WELFARISM). The utilitarian requirement to maximize the sum of utility is a distribution-insensitive form of welfarism. But it is also possible to have distribution-sensitive forms of welfarism that attach value to equality or sufficiency in the distribution of welfare, or that attach priority to promoting the welfare of those with less of it than others.

Both Rawls and Dworkin deny that such interpersonal comparisons of welfare are necessary in order to determine whether our institutions are just. Instead of welfare, Rawls focuses on the distribution of social primary goods, defined as all-purpose means that every reasonable individual is presumed to need or want, such as income and wealth. As we shall see, Dworkin assesses institutions according to whether they produce distributions that are free of envy. It is common to present welfarism, Rawls's view, and Dworkin's view as providing rival answers to Amartya Sen's Question, “Equality of What?” (1980). Those who ask this question do so in search of a standard of interpersonal comparison, ‘metric’, or ‘currency’ that we should employ to determine an individual’s level of advantage, and so decide whether she is better off or worse off than others, and how much priority we should attach to providing her with additional benefits (see EGALITARIANISM; EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY).

Dworkin (2000: 48-59) begins his critique of welfare egalitarianism by inviting us to consider the following two scenarios:

Louis's Case: All individuals enjoy the same level of welfare because income and wealth are distributed equally and their goals are equally expensive to pursue. Louis then deliberately cultivates goals that more expensive to pursue compared to those of others, and he will therefore enjoy a lower level of welfare than others unless he receives a larger share of income and wealth.

Jude's Case: All individuals enjoy the same level of welfare because those who have less income and wealth also have goals that are less expensive to pursue compared to those of others. At first, Jude's goals are inexpensive, but he then deliberately cultivates goals that are more expensive than initially, but no more expensive than those of others. Jude will therefore enjoy a lower level of welfare than others unless he receives a share of income and wealth that is larger than his initial share but no larger than that of others.

Welfare egalitarianism implies either (i) that Louis is entitled to more income and wealth than others or (ii) that Louis is not entitled to more income and wealth than others because his expensive goals were deliberately cultivated. If (i), then one objection to welfare egalitarianism is that it is implausible because it requires others to settle for less income and wealth than Louis, who differs from them merely as a result of his deliberately cultivated expensive goals. However, if we accept (ii), then
an implication of this is that Jude is not entitled to the same level of income and wealth as others enjoy. This is because, when Jude cultivates goals that are more expensive than initially but no more expensive than those of others, he does so deliberately. In this case, an objection to welfare egalitarianism is that it is implausible because it penalizes individuals with initial goals that are comparatively inexpensive to pursue. This is the *expensive tastes objection* to welfare egalitarianism.

One response to the objection is to deny that it is unfair to provide Louis with more income and wealth than others. Welfare egalitarians might attempt to do this by pointing out that, since *everyone* is entitled to additional income and wealth if they deliberately cultivate comparatively expensive goals, granting more to Louis does not pander to him in particular (Shiffrin 2004). Instead, Louis merely exercises an option that everyone possesses, whilst others decide not to do so. Therefore, there is a sense in which others choose to enjoy less income and wealth than Louis. To support this argument, the welfare egalitarian might appeal to cases in which many people believe that it is *not* unfair to accommodate such goals. For example, let’s suppose that some individuals request workplace accommodations that are denied to their co-workers on account of their comparatively expensive religious goals (Cohen 1999). Would it be unfair to grant that request? If not, can we provide any reason to treat the goals of Louis any differently without relying controversial judgments about the content of those goals?

An alternative response to the expensive tastes objection is to bite the bullet by accepting that fairness requires withholding from Jude the same level of income and wealth that others enjoy because of his initially comparatively inexpensive goals (see COHEN, G.A.). Whether we find this objection to welfare egalitarianism compelling depends partly on how we judge the size of this bullet.

**II. Equality of Resources**

Let’s now turn to Dworkin’s alternative to welfare egalitarianism, which he calls *equality of resources*. In order to understand the view’s details, it helps to distinguish the following three kinds of scenarios:

1. Cases in which individuals’ circumstances vary because of differences in their goals.
2. Cases in which individuals’ circumstances vary because of differences in their *option luck* – that is, in how their deliberate gambles turn out.
3. Cases in which individuals’ circumstances vary because of differences in their *brute luck* – that is, in ways that are neither chosen nor due to deliberate gambles.

Dworkin argues that, whereas the inequalities in individuals’ holdings that arise in the first two kinds of cases are not unfair, the inequalities that arise in the third kind of case are unfair, and so call for correction. Let’s consider these sets of cases in turn.

To illustrate the first kind of case, we can consider an example involving two farmers, Adrian and Bruce, who are identical in every relevant way, except that
they choose to work at different rates because of their different goals. Whereas Adrian works hard in order to support his expensive lifestyle, Bruce prefers to finish work early to play tennis (Dworkin 2000: 83-84). It's true that Adrian earns more than Bruce, but that's not all that matters for social justice. For Dworkin, the reason that we should deny that their inequality in income is unfair is that neither Adrian nor Bruce envies the other's circumstances. This means that neither sincerely believes the other to enjoy opportunities that are more valuable than his own, as measured by his own judgments about what makes one's life go well. Adrian does not envy Bruce, whose income is much lower; and Bruce does not envy Adrian, who has less time to play tennis. Because of the envy-freeness, we should regard the overall distribution of resources between Adrian and Bruce as an equal one, despite the income inequality between them.

Defined in this way, envy is a term of art drawn from normative economics that is distinct from the vice of envy that is associated with jealousy and spite (Varian 1974). Dworkin's insight is that envy-freeness is valuable because it implies that neither Adrian nor Bruce sincerely believes that their circumstances render them worse off than the other, and so neither can make a good faith claim to redistribution on this basis. Dworkin relies on this envy test in place of a currency of distributive justice, such as welfare or social primary goods. An attractive feature of this view is that it is respectful of each individual's own evaluation of the comparative value of her circumstances. When judging how to distribute resources, it does not utilise a particular conception of the good life that may be at odds with individuals' own beliefs on this matter. In this way, equality of resources respects each individual's responsibility to live her life in accordance with the values and goals that she sets for herself (Dworkin 2011: ch. 16; Parr 2018).

To illustrate the second kind of case, in which individuals' circumstances vary because of differences in their option luck, we can consider a variation on the initial example involving Adrian and Bruce that involves a deliberate gamble. More specifically, let's suppose that Adrian and Bruce flip a coin, with the loser then having to give the winner 20 acres of his land. In this case, we cannot say that the overall distribution of resources is an equal one, nor can we maintain that the loser has chosen a different lifestyle. After all, the loser has chosen the same lifestyle as the winner. Instead, in order to explain why the resulting inequality is fair, Dworkin notes that 'the possibility of loss was part of the life they chose' and that, 'if winners were made to share their winnings with losers, then no one would gamble...and the kind of life preferred by both those who in the end win and those who lose would be unavailable' (2000: 74-75). Therefore, just as those unwilling to work as hard as Adrian lack a valid complaint when he becomes wealthier than them, those who are unwilling to bear high risks that are equally available to them lack a valid complaint when high risk-takers become wealthier as a result of their gambles. In these ways, Dworkin integrates into his account a concern for the moral importance of empowering people to make certain types of choice, where this is accompanied by a willingness to hold people liable for their effects. This component is absent in many rival egalitarian theories, prompting G. A. Cohen to conclude that 'Dworkin has, in effect, performed for egalitarianism the considerable service of incorporating within it the most powerful idea in the

Coupled with the finding from welfare economics that perfect markets lead to envy-free outcomes, an especially striking implication of Dworkin’s arguments is that ‘the idea of an economic market, as a device for setting prices for a vast variety of goods and services, must be at the center of any attractive theoretical development of equality of resources’ (2000: 66). Indeed, Dworkin believes that, as both a theoretical device and a political institution, the ‘free market is not equality’s enemy, as it often supposed, but indispensable to genuine equality’ (2011: 357). However, he also recognises that potentially extensive regulations are needed not only to correct markets that fail to function perfectly but, as we shall see, also to respond to inequalities that arise due to differences in brute luck. It’s to these cases that we now turn.

Dworkin’s permissive attitude towards inequalities in individuals’ holdings that result from some (but not necessarily all) differences in goals or in option luck is not replicated in his treatment of inequalities that arise due to differences in brute luck. Let’s contrast the circumstances of Adrian with those of Claude, who unfortunately has a ‘black thumb’ and, thus, a lower potential income (Dworkin 2000: 85-92). In this case, Claude’s lower earnings are attributable purely to his misfortune in the natural lottery. For this reason, we should regard the inequality in the distribution of resources between him and Adrian as unfair. Thus, Dworkin writes,

Equality requires that those who choose more expensive ways to live – which includes choosing less productive occupations measured by what others want – have less residual income in consequence. But it also requires that no one have less income simply in consequence of less native talent (2000: 102).

Again, the envy test helps to explain these judgments. The reason that the inequality between Claude and Adrian is unfair is because Claude envies Adrian’s circumstances. In particular, Claude envies Adrian’s native talent for farming that enables Adrian to earn a higher income. This is important because it implies that Claude sincerely believes that his circumstances – defined so as to include his talents – render him worse off than Adrian, and so he can make a good faith claim to redistribution on this basis. The same goes for others who believe that their circumstances render them worse off than others, say, because of disability, less marketable talents, or being born into a poorer family.

How should we respond to cases in which individuals’ circumstances vary because of differences in their brute luck? Dworkin’s answer is complex. To begin, we can consider an example in which two sighted individuals, Debbie and Eve, each have a 20% chance of developing some disease that will make them blind within five years. Additionally, each has the equal opportunity to purchase insurance policies that offer differing degrees and kinds of compensation were she to develop the disease. Let’s also suppose that Debbie takes out more generous insurance than Eve, either because the loss of Debbie’s eyesight means more to her (perhaps she is an artist who attaches great significance to being able to paint country landscapes)
or because Debbie is more risk-averse. Dworkin argues that, if both Debbie and Eve contract the disease, we should not redistribute from Debbie, whose compensation is more generous, to Eve, whose compensation is less generous (2000: 340-341). This is because:

...the availability of insurance would mean that, though both had had brute bad luck, the difference between them was a matter of option luck, and the arguments we entertained against disturbing the results of option luck under conditions of equal antecedent risk hold here as well (Dworkin 2000: 77).

The theoretical appeal of insurance is that it turns differences in circumstances that are due to brute luck into differences in circumstances that are due to option luck. Therefore, ‘if the condition just stated were met – if everyone had an equal risk of suffering some catastrophe that would leave him or her handicapped, and everyone knew roughly what the odds were and had ample opportunity to insure – then handicaps would pose no special problem’ (2000: 77). The same goes for the risk of suffering other kinds of bad brute luck, such as the risk of having less marketable talents or being born into a poorer family.

Summarizing what he regards as a great strength of this approach, Dworkin notes that 'it allows people to make decisions about the relative importance of various risks for themselves, so that they can tailor their use of their resources to their own judgments, ambitions, tastes, convictions, and commitments' (2000: 346). However, a complication arises in the real world where individuals do not face equal risks of suffering bad brute luck and they do not enjoy equal opportunities to insure against those risks. An individual who is born blind cannot take out insurance against going blind. The same goes for someone in poverty with no disposable income to spend on insurance, or someone with a history of genetic blindness in the family who would face prohibitively expensive premiums from insurance companies who are aware of this. For this reason, Dworkin argues that we must speculate about which package of premium and cover individuals would have selected had they enjoyed a fair opportunity to insure, and then we should use public policy to mimic these decisions (2000: 77-78). If individuals would agree to pay expensive premiums in order to have extensive protection against some set of diseases or lacking marketable talents or being born into a poor family, then we may tax (or otherwise burden) individuals – taking from them an amount identical to the premium that they would have agreed to pay – in order to compensate (either in cash or in kind) individuals who suffer from those diseases or have less marketable talents or who are born into poorer families. Dworkin calls this the model of hypothetical insurance.

In order to operationalise this reasoning, we must have some idea of the kinds of insurance decisions that individuals would make under fair conditions. One way in which we can make progress with this difficult issue is to proceed in a statistical rather than individualised manner (Dworkin 2000: 340-346). For example, we might exercise political power in a way that mimics the decisions of the average insurer. This is substantially less epistemically demanding than attempting to enact policies in a way that is sensitive to how each individual would have acted under the specified conditions. Appealing to such estimates, Dworkin argues that a just
society would contain a ‘steeply progressive’ tax on inheritance (2000: 348) and a publicly funded system of universal health care. However, it would probably not fund operations to provide a 1% survival chance for a conjoined twin if they cost $1 million (2000: 315), or support a system in which ‘over a quarter of Medicare payments…[are] spent on people in the last six months of their lives’ (2000: 314).

Whilst the move to statistical hypothetical insurance makes the model more practicable, it comes with costs. In particular, we might worry that Dworkin’s insights lose some of their appeal when defended in this way, such that individuals are subject to policies justified by appeal to the decisions of the average insurer, rather than to the specific decisions that they would have made under the specified conditions (Macleod 1998: chs 4 and 5). The force of this complaint depends, among other things, on whether alternative accounts of social justice are better equipped to identify responses in ways that are sensitive to individuals’ distinctive concerns.

III. Harshness Objections

Some critics of Dworkin’s equality of resources maintain that it is too harsh on those who are on the losing end of inequalities that result from differences in option luck. Pressing one version of this objection, Elizabeth Anderson asks us to consider the case of ‘an uninsured driver who negligently makes an illegal turn that causes an accident with another car’ (1999: 295). Since this driver’s disastrous consequences are due to bad option luck, does fairness forbid forcing others to assist him in this time of need? After all, any disadvantage that the driver suffers is due to his own deliberate gamble, and so it may seem that he has no claim to assistance from others, according to Dworkin’s view. If correct, this abandonment of the negligent driver would seem to count very strongly against the intuitive appeal of equality of resources (Anderson 1999: 298). This is the abandonment objection.

Dworkin takes this objection seriously. His response is to insist that we have special reasons for preventing an individual from taking risks that, if she were to lose, would result in absolute deprivation. That is, he believes that we are sometimes justified in restricting an individual’s liberty in order to ensure that she does not suffer an especially terrible fate. We might achieve this either by forbidding individuals from engaging in particular risky activities or by requiring them to have insurance that guarantees a minimal standard of living. The challenge for Dworkin and those sympathetic to his view is to explain why we are permitted to restrict liberty in this way. Are these instances of justifiable paternalism? Or, might the justification for these restrictions be grounded in something else, such as in the value of sustaining the prerequisites for well-functioning democratic institutions? Dworkin mentions both of these possibilities, but fails to elaborate on either in any significant detail (2000: 75).

A related objection to equality of resources comes from those who note that some insurance policies are prohibitively expensive, and that this would remain the case even in a society in which resources were distributed more evenly (Anderson 1999: 298; Macleod 1998: 99-100; Otsuka 2002). To see the problem, let’s suppose that the only way in which to protect against the risks associated with some disease is to
undergo a series of operations that cost more than most people could afford, and that, because of this, the associated insurance premiums are prohibitively expensive. Dworkin is committed to the claim that, if an individual then contracts the disease, we have no reasons to force others to assist her, given that she took out no insurance. But critics protest that this result is unfair, since this individual is now worse off than others through no fault or responsibility of her own. We can call this the *unfairness objection* to equality of resources.

This objection appears especially forceful since Dworkin defines option luck as ‘a matter of how deliberate and calculated gambles turn out – whether someone gains or loses through accepting an isolated risk he or she should have anticipated and might have declined’ (2000: 73). But, in what sense is an individual’s decision not to insure ‘a deliberate gamble’ when the insurance is unaffordable to her? It is on this basis that defenders of the unfairness objection conclude that, if an individual lacks affordable insurance options and so is unable to decline the risk, then any disadvantage she suffers as a result is due to brute luck, not option luck. Under these conditions, the model of hypothetical insurance seems to fail in its ambition to convert differences in circumstances that are due to brute luck into differences in circumstances that are due to option luck.

One response to this objection is to abandon the claim that there must be reasonably inexpensive insurance available in order for a decision to qualify as a deliberate gamble. Instead, we might embrace the idea that what matters is only that insurance is equally available to all, where this includes the possibility that it is equally unavailable to everyone (Williams 2004). On this view, the fact that insurance was unaffordable to someone who contracts a disease generates no unfairness providing that she is not unique in being unable to protect herself against this risk. In the light of the unfairness objection, the appeal of Dworkin’s equality of resources depends on clarifying and defending this strategy more fully.

**Acknowledgements**

For helpful written comments, I thank an anonymous reviewer for the *International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, as well as Matthew Clayton, Colin Macleod, Zofia Stemplowska, and Andrew Williams.

**Cross-References**

COHEN, G.A.; EGALITARIANISM; EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY; RAWLS, JOHN; WELFARISM.

**References**


**Suggested Readings**


