

**A Challenge to the Obviousness of  
Equality of Opportunity**  
**Un desafío a la obviedad de la igualdad de  
oportunidades**

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**Recepción:** 09-10-2016 **Aceptación:** 09-05-2017

**Resumen:** En este trabajo desafío el principio fundamental de igualdad de oportunidades, entendido como “personas con los mismos talentos, tanto ricos como pobres, deben tener las mismas oportunidades para desarrollar sus talentos y alcanzar una vida plena. En este sentido: la igualdad de oportunidades no es necesariamente algo bueno en sí mismo; más aún, es algo que no es posible alcanzar en plenitud, y aun asumiendo que lo fuera, tampoco es algo deseable. En consecuencia, se debiera pensar en otro principio que mandate las políticas públicas.

La búsqueda de la igualdad de oportunidades ha llevado a las sociedades a poner una enorme presión sobre las escuelas, las que son vistas como las instituciones sociales encargadas de nivelar la cancha, con el correspondiente incentivo a preparar a los estudiantes sólo para el mercado laboral, pero no para su florecimiento como miembros de una comunidad, trayendo consecuencias negativas en la cohesión social.

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En primer lugar, introduciré algunos conceptos de igualdad de oportunidades, donde el principio de justa igualdad de oportunidades de Rawls, será revisado de manera extensa. Mi argumento estará fundado en dos críticas complementarias: la concepción liberal del Yo; y el orden léxico del principio de justa igualdad de oportunidades sobre el principio de diferencia. Luego, mostraré que la propuesta igualitarista de Cohen es una buena alternativa, pero que no considera las implicancias en valores como la fraternidad, solidaridad y empatía. Así, no sólo desafío a los liberales, sino también, en parte, a los igualitaristas. A continuación, presentaré mi propuesta que agrega aspectos igualitaristas, valores democráticos y comunitarismo, principio que llamo “igualdad de acceso a una ciudadanía democrática”. Finalmente, presentaré las implicancias generales sobre el sistema escolar de ser aceptado este principio.

**Palabras clave:** filosofía, educación, igualdad, igualdad de oportunidades, meritocracia, talento, ciudadanía, comunitarismo, igualitarismo.

**Abstract:** In this work, I challenge the fundamental principle of equality of opportunity, that equally talented people, whether rich or poor, should have equal opportunities to develop their talents and flourish. In this sense, I argue that: equality of opportunity is not something necessarily good in itself; it will never be achieved; and, if it were, it is not desirable. Consequently, we should think in other principle to rule our social policies. The persecution of equality of opportunity has led societies to put a lot of pressure to schools, which are seen as the social institutions to level the playing field, with the correspondent incentive to prepare students for the job market, but not for their flourishing as members of a community and the consequent loss in social cohesion.

First and foremost, I will introduce several concepts of equality of opportunity, where Rawlsian fair equality of opportunity will be extended reviewed. My argument will be primarily based on two critiques: the liberal conception of the self; and the lexical priority of fair

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equality of opportunity over the difference principle. Then, I will show why Cohen's currency for egalitarianism is a good alternative principle, but does not consider its implications on values such as fraternity, solidarity and empathy. In this sense, I will not only challenge Rawlsian liberals but, in some respects, to egalitarians too. Next, my proposal is a principle that combines aspects from the debate on egalitarian currency, democratic values and communitarianism, what I call, equal access to democratic citizenship. Finally, I will present the implications over the school system if we choose to use this proposed principle rather than equality of opportunity.

**Keywords:** philosophy, education, equality, equality of opportunity, meritocracy, talent, citizenship, communitarianism, egalitarianism.

### 1.- Introduction

Our common idea about equality of opportunity suggests that equally talented people should have equal opportunities to conduct their lives as they want. In a Guardian interview, Matt Cavanagh argues "that the position of most good liberals on equality of opportunity is a mixture of three principles - meritocracy, equality and [non] discrimination - but that if you put these under the microscope then you discover there is little agreement on the details, leaving society with what amounts to an artificial consensus by default<sup>1</sup>." At first glance, I am sympathetic with this rationale which is based on an ideal of justice where people's background, specifically their family of origin and socio-economic history, should not determine their chances of success. For what could possibly be objectionable in such an idea? However, if we imagine what might happen if we achieved this ideal, problems arise.

In order to achieve equality of opportunity (henceforth 'EofO'), societies, following the American educator Horace Mann, believed that

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<sup>1</sup> (Crace, 2002)

schools are the “great equalizer<sup>2</sup>”, and therefore put much of their effort into finding a fair school system. We are convinced this system must ensure that every country, region and neighborhood has school giving a high-quality education. This has influenced the direction of education policies with intellectuals wondering how we can provide people with EofO and left and right-wing governments pursuing this aim.

As a direct consequence of the continuous search for EofO, our school systems have been focused on giving children tools for the job market rather than concentrating on enabling them to flourish and participate in a community. This puts a lot of pressure on schools. Implications of this logic are the standardization of education, the consequent teaching-to-the-test incentive, and the necessity of citizenship education programmes to balance the bad effects of our individualistic models.

Nevertheless, I believe most social policies geared towards better opportunities for vulnerable people are good and necessary in the short run because they aim for social justice. However, in the long run if society wants a fair system we should stop and analyze what would happen if an absolute level of EofO were achieved. The next section defines what EofO is and which of its premises we are going to challenge.

## **2.- What is understood as Equality of Opportunity**

It is accepted that most public policies try to give better opportunities to people. Right-wing parties support the idea, but surprisingly some left-wing parties also embrace it without question it. People support it and credit it with creating more and better opportunities for those who need them. ‘Equality of opportunity’ is now a political campaign slogan, and people vote for whoever offers everyone better opportunities. The concept is so popular that 90% of US citizens<sup>3</sup> say that EofO is

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<sup>2</sup> Mann introduced this concept in 1848.

<sup>3</sup> (Stanford University, 2014)

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“absolutely essential”. That only 23% of Chileans<sup>4</sup> believe their country offers everyone equal opportunities reflect their dissatisfaction with inequality of opportunity’. In Janet Radcliffe Richards’s words<sup>5</sup>, “most people seem to take it for granted that equality of opportunity is a Good Thing we should be aiming for, and that our only problem lies in achieving it. So, institutions and governments declare their commitment to it, employ experts to tell them how to get it, and study statistics to find out how far they are falling short.” Nowadays EofO appears as something obvious. Thus, no one really questions its rationale, creating a “veil of obviousness”, as the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser suggests happens with ideologies<sup>6</sup>.

This section introduces different views of EofO, their differences and implications for social policy. I challenge the fundamental principle of EofO, that equally talented people, whether rich or poor, should have equal opportunities to develop their talents and flourish. Philosophers have long analyzed EofO, but the most intense discussion started after Rawls’ Theory of Justice and his Fair Equality of Opportunity principle (henceforth ‘FEO’). This dissertation develops that discussion. This complex debate is relevant because it is rooted in the idea that EofO tries to find a balance within the eternal struggle between equality and liberty. Analysis of different EofO reading reveals that there is no-obvious ideal to follow<sup>7</sup>. Despite there being one concept of EofO, there are different conceptions of that ideal.

These conceptions have been grouped into four different, and sometimes complementary, versions that help us to understand the different approaches from where we can face the philosophical debate. First, Formal Equality of Opportunity prohibits discrimination based on applicants’ circumstances when they apply say for a job or school place, but it does not define how it should be allocate that place. Second, Meritocracy states that people should compete under equal

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<sup>4</sup> (La Tercera, 2015)

<sup>5</sup> (Radcliffe R, 1997, p. 253)

<sup>6</sup> (Althusser, 1971)

<sup>7</sup> See further discussion in (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2002)

conditions for a position or resource, and the only variable to consider is the merit of each competitor. Even though both conceptions are against arbitrary discrimination, the former is bounded by formal definitions and rules whilst the latter is not. Then, Rawlsian fair equality of opportunity principle aims to take account of inequality in people's different social backgrounds, unlike the career open to talents principle. Rawls' theory also tries to balance the unequal distribution of natural endowments, but only by incorporating the difference principle, whose lexical relation to FEO is examined later. Finally, Equality of Opportunity for Welfare says only personal choice should influence the differentiation in people's welfare. Here, EofO can also be understood as the liberty to develop our lives as we want, based only on our decisions and never limited by unfair restrictions such as our families or the talents that we have, which, as luck egalitarians argue, are the result of good fortune. Thus, people should be free of arbitrary obstacles that hinder them making decisions.

By analyzing the FEO approach I show that EofO is compromised. Despite all government efforts to level the playing field, it is impossible to achieve. Even if it were achievable neither FEO nor meritocracy are even desirable. Equality of Opportunity for Welfare becomes an interesting alternative, but it is still flawed when the implications for some social values are considered.

In his work 'Theory of Justice'<sup>8</sup>, Rawls argues that free and rational agents in the original position would choose two principles of justice in order to achieve a society that understands and supports justice as fairness. The first is the liberty principle which, Rawls says, will ensure people are protected by a set of basic liberties such as political liberty, freedom of speech and freedom of thought, among others. Indeed, the reason for selecting this principle in the first place is to protect these freedoms because they are the social foundation for equality of self-respect. The second principle makes social and economic inequalities permissible if and only if that benefits everyone, especially the less

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<sup>8</sup> (Rawls, 1999)

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advantaged (*difference principle*), and also if everyone has equal opportunity to access to the highest positions in society (*fair equality of opportunity*). Fair equality of opportunity takes priority over the first component of this second principle. I will challenge this lexical relation and the premises behind FEO later.

### 2.1.- Education and Equality of Opportunity

It is taken for granted that achieving EofO is positive and this has led us to put a lot of pressure in on schools as the social institutions that are supposed to give everyone opportunities. This translates into a demand for better schools to ensure a fair system where children from poor neighborhoods can have the same chances of success in life as rich children. This is an understandable desire because good jobs demand basic skills, and most people think that such skills must be learnt at schools. Therefore, better education is seen as a window for social mobility.

The idea behind schools creating EofO is that the socio-economic background of students should not determine their future and that everyone should be able to flourish according to their talents and willingness to use those talents. Thus, an educational system must ensure that everyone has access to a high-quality school that should have all the necessary conditions to help and support students in their learning process. No matter what political ideas rule in a country, most viewpoints coincide in this respect. As just one example from the British Department for Education claims<sup>9</sup>,

We work to achieve a highly educated society in which opportunity is equal for children and young people, no matter what their background or family circumstances.

Even though I am sympathetic to the idea that the family we grow up in should not dictate our success in life, I believe that citizens´ desires

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<sup>9</sup> See more in <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education> (UK Government, 2015)

and government policies are mostly focused on one side of the coin: the side of talented people. What families and society demand is an abstract ideal of 'quality education'. So education becomes the ideal place to solve injustices and ensure that equally talented people will receive the same opportunities for success. In this sense, according to Rawlsian liberals, education is the tool whereby our societies have ensure personal development. However, this ideal creates frustration in people because its promise cannot be fulfilled, and, more to the point it is not desirable.

### **3.- Equality of Opportunity is unachievable**

This section argues that EofO is an unachievable illusion. Moreover, it leads to popular frustration and anger because, unlike many policy makers, they have to experience the failure of public policies. Also, whilst the striving for EofO leads to complex problems being solved, they are answers to wrong questions. Very thoughtful policies are created, which, although designed well intellectually, will never accomplish EofO. My main arguments are that merit and effort are complex variables to measure and that personal characteristics and socio-economic background are an extreme influence on student outcome, so, it is impossible to compensate for the inequality arising from difference in family background. It could be said that EofO is too broad to make a difference, or in other words, it can never work as long as the starting points are so unequal, and in trying to reach an equal starting point becomes unconstructive.

Let us assume that a government aims to offer EofO. In order to achieve this, the first policy looks to eradicate all unacceptable discrimination in the school admissions process, that is, discrimination based on gender, economic background, religion and so forth. This policy is society's first effort in ensuring equal opportunities to school access. Supporters of EofO would say that a fair admission process should not discriminate on these characteristics, but will select according to academic merit and student effort. However, even though



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the admission process is faithful to the 'idea' of EofO the cultural and family history of the students will never leave the students in a *ceteris paribus* condition to measure their effort<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, formal equality of opportunity is not strong enough to offer EofO.

Once admitted to a school through whatever fair process of admission huge differences will still exist between the most talented students in a public school and those equally talented in a private school. It has been demonstrated that student nutrition has a tremendous influence on their concentration and learning capacity. Several governments have tried to fix this by implementing a national programme to feed students in public schools. However, although this has been remedied in a lot of cases other factors still exist that prevent the offering of true EofO. Thus, for Rawl's FEO principle to be achieved it still needs more compensatory policies to be implemented.

A third step in the attainment of EofO is to try to compensate for academic differences between students. These could be a result of their cultural background, their previous, the emotional family support, or simply the different capacity for learning that every human being has, despite potentially equal talent. One way to manage this has been to designate more resources for low income students, a good, yet still imperfect measure. Another way would be for teachers to focus more on disadvantaged children in the class. However, the most difficult variable to control is the influence of families on student outcomes.

Compensating for inequality is the beginning of a slippery slope. It is reasonable to say that, if we aim to offer EofO, we should do everything within our power to achieve it, including not only what the government can – and must - do, but also the natural desire of parents to give the best future to their children. Up to now, the discussion has centered on the school system, but we should also consider what happens before the student arrives at school. Rawls suggests that to achieve true FEO we have to question if, for example, bedtime stories should be banned or not. It is well known that the amount of time parents give their young

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<sup>10</sup> Roemer developed an analytical model to try to measure effort. See (Roemer, 2012)

children has an enormous impact on their life, because more time equals greater stimulus. However, because the first Rawlsian liberty principle has priority over FEO Rawls would be against that kind of ban if we chose to compensate disadvantaged students. Furthermore, it is unlikely that even the most radical egalitarian would end quality time with their children to contribute to a more equal society. Governments cannot forbid rich families to read bedtime stories to their children, send them on travels around the world, or pay for music classes, etc. These children will always have better opportunities in life, no matter how many compensations are built into the school system. It follows therefore that some rich students who lack talent will succeed in life anyway because of these privileges<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, the extensive measures required to achieve FEO are inapplicable because it clash with freedom and autonomy.

So achieving EofO is hopeless because its demands, when carried to their logical conclusion, are infinite. The first step is about impartiality and non-discrimination by eliminating religion, gender or class barriers. The second is about merit and the justification for promoting the best academic performers. The latter follows the liberal principle behind the idea of career open to talents, the idea that people have a right to flourish in society according to their talents and willingness to use them without other's interference. Finally, there is the attempt to control family influence. So both formulations of EofO, formal and fair equality of opportunity, fail on their own terms.

As a political idea EofO is a blurred concept. Every time we think we are going to achieve it, some issue arises making it an unreachable dream and any effort to follow it, as Cavanagh says, is "a waste of time. [Moreover], what we should be doing is trying to make sure that no one is left without hope or to make sure that no one is left in a position where there is nothing they can do to change their life for the better<sup>12</sup>."

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Reeves argues that rich families secure privileges for their children so that they cannot fall below a glass floor that stops them to go down in the social mobility scale. See (Reeves, 2013)

<sup>12</sup> (Crace, 2002)

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In support of this desire, in the following section I will argue that a reviewed and extended version of equality of opportunity for welfare should replace the pursuit of the FEO principle.

### **4.- Equality of Opportunity is undesirable**

Besides EofO being unachievable, is it even desirable? This part answers negatively to this question because a society with EofO would still be an unequal one. Most people defend EofO because they are convinced that only effort and merit contributes to personal success. Moreover, individualism and the ideal of personal achievement relate to these aspirations. Selznick, an Etzionian communitarian, defends EofO, saying: “Equality of opportunity vindicates moral equality. It has the vital but limited objective of overcoming prejudice and systematic subordination while maintaining the legitimacy of differential rewards<sup>13</sup>.” His words reflect the popular intuition that fairness should be distributed as a reward for effort, a widespread but flawed idea that I will challenge. He also adds, “equal opportunity invites meritocracy”, but that meritocracy “can undermine community”. If EofO is achieved, he concludes, ‘winners’ would be worthier than ‘losers’. This world would have a new low-class, determined not by race, gender, income or any other factors besides poor genetic inheritance and being less lucky. In this sense, talented people will always be better off than unskilled people, which is in itself unfair because talent is a matter of luck (as luck egalitarians say) leaving less talented people in a secondary social position in a system that “rewards the lucky and penalizes the unlucky” as Singer says<sup>14</sup>. It can be said then that genetic differences influencing the spread of diverse natural talents will always lead to inequalities. All of this is the result of a society that does not reward unskilled people who do not have the basic talents that are valued in that specific moment. Consequently, a community needs to offer other things besides rewards based on merit. Seeking to build a

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<sup>13</sup> (Selznick, 1998, p. 67)

<sup>14</sup> (Singer, 1993, p. 39)

society that offers perfect opportunities to equally talented people makes no sense if we want a fairer and equal society. Therefore, we should aim for another principle superior to EofO.

In my understanding, liberal thought is primarily based on John Locke, who argues that free and rational individuals in the state of nature may acquire previously unowned land, and the gains of their labour, if and only if they leave “enough and as good in common for others” (the ‘Lockean Proviso’) to ensure that everyone will have the same opportunity to mix their labour with natural resources, and obtain the same fruits. Locke argues then that people have a natural right to appropriate those parts of the world for their survival<sup>15</sup>. Consequently, the ownership of our talents gives us the property of the fruits of our work.

Most liberals, and especially libertarians, argue people have a strong claim to receive the benefits of their work as a result of their talents. Also, people should determine the use of their own talents. Allocation of resources should be responsive to the degree of talent and effort. Challenging the ownership of talents is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but the idea that benefits of talents belong only to those who possess them is at least questionable. Also, the entitlements of talented people can be evaluated within the context of their participation in the society.

Thomas Pogge<sup>16</sup> defends this liberal view saying there is no argument about the ownership of talents. But this radical stance has implications for the ownership of rewards. When he says that “Greater natural talents are not a collective asset in the sense that society should compel those who have them to put them to work for the less favored<sup>17</sup>,” his argument is essentially based on Rawls, in the sense that people have a natural right to their talents. However, the question is how to use those abilities and talents, as Rawls admits when he

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<sup>15</sup> (Locke, 1690)

<sup>16</sup> (Pogge, 1989)

<sup>17</sup> (Rawls, 1974, p. 145)

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introduces the difference principle: “The difference principle represents, in effect, an agreement to regard the distribution of natural talents as in some respects a common asset and to share in the greater social and economic benefits made possible by the complementarities of this distribution<sup>18</sup>.”

Michael Sandel responding to the natural right of ownership over the fruits of our talents states that “In order for me to deserve the benefits associated with ‘my’ superior intelligence<sup>19</sup>, say, it is necessary both that I possess my intelligence (in some non-arbitrary sense of possession), and that I have a right (in a strong, pre-institutional sense of right) that society value intelligence rather than something else. But on Rawls’ account, neither condition holds<sup>20</sup>.” In support of Sandel’s reading it is possible to make a distinction between the ownership of a good X, the use of X, and, therefore, the fruits of the use of X. Otsuka’s account of full-ownership establishes this distinction. When clarifying Cohen’s “full right of self-ownership” he says, “one can fully own a house that one cannot destroy because it is a historical landmark even though it is both plausible to hold and a consequence of the definition I have just introduced that one’s right of ownership over that house is less full than it would have been if, *ceteris paribus*, one had the right to destroy it<sup>21</sup>.” So, it is possible to make the distinction between ownership and full-ownership, and, therefore, make a distinction between use and ownership. Hence, we may have the ownership of talents, but not necessarily determine their total use.

Some may argue that without full-ownership there will be no incentive for people to use their talents in a way that benefits everyone, so society will be damaged and the unskilled in particular. However, following Cohen’s rationale, the use of our talents should be motivated by our membership of a community rather than just the mere striving

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<sup>18</sup> This quote is the one modified by Rawls in his revised version of Theory of Justice. See (Rawls, 1999, p. 87)

<sup>19</sup> We can assume that intelligence is a natural asset, but the argument can easily be extended to any talent.

<sup>20</sup> (Sandel, 1982, p. 77)

<sup>21</sup> (Otsuka, 1998, p. 67)

for personal benefit. This allows us to think that the claim of talented people for the benefits of their work can be compensated and evaluated on this criterion.

The talent-ownership rationale argues that in this world where EofO is achieved, the function of EofO is to try to measure what each agent deserves, not merely for his capacities, but also for his effort, and then to offer him a fair opportunity to compete in equal conditions and to thereby flourish<sup>22</sup>. The idea that we should be evaluated on merit only seems attractive because we assume our talent and effort should be rewarded, but this prejudice is based on a debatable idea of individualism that is nevertheless inherent in and intrinsic to liberal ideas. I argue that this idea has direct connection with our conception of the self. I will later counter this with a communitarian approach<sup>23</sup>.

Meritocratic equality of opportunity, like formal equality of opportunity, rejects any kind of arbitrary discrimination, but it still discriminates according to the personal history of each individual agent. Elizabeth Anderson explains<sup>24</sup>:

This argument may be 'obvious', but it is wrong. EofO is a valid ideal for deciding who, among those with already developed talents and motivation, should have access to the best jobs in an exogenously given occupational hierarchy. It cannot guide us in the allocation of K-12 educational opportunities, where both the talent and motivation of those seeking education, and the structure of educational opportunities, are endogenous to the decision being made.

A big problem is that meritocracy, like EofO, is also a blurred concept. Cavanagh argues that discrimination is just one component of our

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<sup>22</sup> (Campbell, 1974) (Roemer, 2012)

<sup>23</sup> Current psychological studies have found that when people get richer and with more wealth their empathy goes down and their sense of self-made goes up. So, it is reasonable to say that the current popular demand for equal opportunities based on effort and talent could be based on this psychological construction that we are self-made persons. See (Piff, 2013)

<sup>24</sup> (Anderson, 2004, p. 101)

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understanding of EofO and should be treated as a separate issue. He contrasts meritocracy and equality: "Consider an employer who refuses to give jobs to black applicants because he thinks they are mentally or morally inferior. Saying that this is wrong because he is failing to treat them equally, or failing to treat them according to their merits, does not capture what is distinctively wrong with it.<sup>25</sup>" This intuition about the wrongness of the employer's decision shows the complexity of finding a definition for merit and its relationship with equality and fairness.

This complexity may be rooted in the origin of the term. Michael Young introduced 'meritocracy' in his work *The Rise of the Meritocracy*<sup>26</sup>, which was intended as a satiric description of a future dystopia where a new social order is constructed based on intellect and merit. However, after a few years his term, coined to critique the British elite, was co-opted by right-wing thinkers who used it to describe an aspirational ideal.

Additionally, meritocratic thinking leads to a society where individual survival is prioritized and the impact on social values such as fraternity, empathy and solidarity is not considered. This is because meritocracy calls for a distribution of goods according to personal merit, but does not take into account that such merit is dependent on an individual's historical circumstances. Therefore, if an agent does not recognize the fact that society makes a reasonable contribution to the development of her merit and capacity of effort, the relations between she and her environment can be damaged, and her sense of community will be diminished. Thus, even if we achieve EofO, we will still be living in a world where communities will be split into talented and unskilled people, creating different classes of individuals where some will always be better off and others condemned to marginalization. Supporters of meritocracy must accept these inequalities as a consequence of their support for the self-made individual.

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<sup>25</sup> (Cavanagh, 2002, p. 24)

<sup>26</sup> (Young, 1958)

Some may argue that rejecting EofO reduces the use of talents because without meritocracy there is no incentive to develop them. The question is, then, without equal access to opportunities, how do we ensure those talents benefit the whole of society. I am not saying that they should not be used to achieve a fair society. Of course, talent should not be wasted because talents and their development are necessary for humankind. We all receive benefits from watching a football game with really good players, or listening to an incredible musician play at the Royal Albert Hall. My argument is just that talents should be *used* in the fairest without damaging the community.

To face this reasonable challenge, I will now explain why the incentives that people should have to use their talents are not necessarily linked with personal benefit, and especially with monetary incentives.

#### **4.1.- The lexical ordering of the Difference Principle and Fair Equality of Opportunity**

Rawlsian liberals might respond that the difference principle solves the problem. Their assumption is that talented people will work better than unskilled, therefore, the gains from talented will compensate the unskilled and will leave them better than if they worked alone. Rawls' rationale implies that society should reward more talented people so they use their talents for everyone's benefit. That is why Rawls so readily accepts socioeconomic inequality.

So, the question is whether it is fair to incentivize talented people or not, or, whether the fair equality of opportunity principle should have lexical priority over the difference principle. That is, is it morally justified fair equality of opportunity principle above other social justice goals? In Rawls' work, the FEO's predominance is stated but not fully explained<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, Rawls, as an egalitarian, accepts that "no one

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<sup>27</sup> Even though Pogge defends and makes a detailed effort to interpret this lexical relation, he also admits that there is an ambiguity in "Rawls' notion of the social bases of self-respect," which obstruct its understanding. See (Pogge, 1989, p. 162)



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deserves his place in the distribution of native endowments<sup>28</sup> because they are “arbitrary from a moral point of view<sup>29</sup>.” Yet, he also says explicitly that “the difference principle would allocate resources in education, say, so as to improve the long-term expectation of the least favored. If this end is attained by giving more attention to the better endowed, it is permissible; otherwise not<sup>30</sup>.” Thus, the inclusion of the difference principle, the social justice component of Rawlsian theory, aims to ensure that talented people achieve their full potential, and any improvement in the situation of the worse off, due to economic growth and increased production of social primary goods, is only an indirect consequence.

A first argument against this lexical priority is offered by Cohen. The Marxist philosopher recognizes that the difference principle has a positive aim, but objects to its “application in defence of special money incentives to talented people<sup>31</sup>.” The reasoning is as follows. Rawls argues that society must ensure that talented people develop and make effort because otherwise not only are they harmed, but also and especially the unskilled. To avoid this outcome society must reward talented people more for their work. The assumption made here, and well challenged by Cohen, is that talented people will only work on an activity related to their talents if they get paid for it. However, this approach is based on a view of individuals that attacks basic conditions of community and leads to a tyranny of the talented over the untalented<sup>32</sup>. Cohen adds that “The difference principle can be used to justify paying incentives that induce inequalities only when the attitude of talented people runs counter to the spirit of the difference principle itself: they would not need special incentives if they were themselves

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<sup>28</sup> (Rawls, 1999, p. 104)

<sup>29</sup> (Rawls, 1999, p. 312)

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>31</sup> (Cohen, 1991, p. 269)

<sup>32</sup> It may be said that the tyranny appears when the talented people demand for a big reward to do their job to the rest of society, who cannot do anything to respond if they want to be in a better off condition, leaving them without any chance to negotiate with talented people.

unambivalently committed to the principle<sup>33</sup>.” Consequently, if the talented claim a reward it means they consider themselves to be outside the community. This reasoning implies that participation in a community occurs, as Mason states, “when citizens see themselves as related to each other not merely as moral subjects engaged in a cooperative venture, but also as bound together by a shared way of life with which they identify<sup>34</sup>.” Without being communitarians, and without saying so explicitly, Cohen and Mason not only remark on the relevance of fraternity and community as a reason for the talented to accept the difference principle, they imply that is the bases of human life.

To illustrate a different argument against this lexical priority I will borrow, and slightly modify, Arneson’s example<sup>35</sup>. Imagine a society where the government must decide between two policies. On the one hand, there is a possibility of improving a highly talented middle class student’s quality of education in order to offer the same opportunities as an equally talented rich student who attends a private school. There is also an alternative policy to improve the quality of education of untalented vulnerable students, who are considerably worse off than the rich and middle class talented students, not only because of economic reasons, but also because they lack the talents that society values most. Because fair equality of opportunity has priority over the difference principle, a Rawlsian liberal would recommend the first policy, even though its marginal gain is much less than the second. However, a prioritarian would say that the government should choose the second<sup>36</sup>. The advantage of the priority view is that it privileges policies that aim for social justice rather than a fair competition among talented people. The social cost of the first policy is not only measured by the absolute value of the gain not obtained by the untalented, but also, and primarily, by the loss of social cohesion, and the

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<sup>33</sup> (Cohen, 1991, pp. 268-269)

<sup>34</sup> (Mason, 1993, p. 225)

<sup>35</sup> (Arneson, 1999, p. 82)

<sup>36</sup> For a deeply explanation of prioritarianism see (Parfit, 1997)

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comprehensive claim of injustice and “excusable envy”, in Rawls’ words, felt by the untalented.

On the other hand, liberals might argue that if in addition to the loss of social cohesion, unskilled students are affected by a loss of dignity as a consequence of inequality, then this should be included in the cost-benefit analysis made for the difference principle. However, it is likely that a communitarian would argue that it is neither reasonable nor possible to incorporate that loss in the analysis, because the nature of social cohesion (e.g. fraternity and solidarity) is different to the nature of economic benefits, therefore, it makes no sense to include them in the same equation. The social cost and communitarian arguments “rapidly [become] enmeshed in problems about free will, ultimate desert and the nature of the self<sup>37</sup>.” The implications of these arguments cause us to question which conceptualization of the self should rule our analysis and also to query the idea of a self-made individual, which it will be discussed on the next section.

### 4.2.- Underlying conceptions of the self

I debate these questions by describing the Communitarian response to the epistemic conception of the self and how this differs with Rawls. I then introduce an alternative principle to EofO, influenced by the debate on egalitarian currency, democracy and communitarianism.

The implicit idea of the self in Rawls assumes that the agents in the original position do not know any information about their characteristics or the society they will live in. They only know that they will have certain desires and liberties which should be protected. This rationale is based on the underlying, but undeclared idea that rational agents are self-interested maximizers of their personal wellbeing. Rawls assumes that, following a liberal tradition, people are a rational abstraction with their identity as persons uninfluenced by the environment, which is exactly the opposite of the communitarian view. As Lincoln Dalhberg says,

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<sup>37</sup> (Radcliffe R, 1997, p. 270)

“Unlike the unencumbered self of liberalism, the communitarian self is constituted within relationships structured by social roles and shared subjectivity. In this context, a new special relation is generated between the individuals and the society.<sup>38</sup>” Moreover, as Pogge shows, “Sandel’s central discovery is that for Rawls the self is prior to its ends.<sup>39</sup>”

In contrast, the communitarian understanding of the self is linked to the values that the community shares with its members, and which shape the identity of each individual<sup>40</sup>. Communitarians reject the individualist view of identity independent of community influence. For them, people’s values, culture, beliefs and personal characteristics are determined by the community in which they live. Therefore, the individualistic and self-interested conception of the self undermines the building of a strong community. Moreover, according to some Communitarians, it makes no sense to imagine the existence of a rational person in the ‘original position’, who knows nothing about the society of which he will be part.

The communitarian view leads to a society that supports solidarity and mutual assistance, not charity for the most needy, where people are concerned simply because they are also members of the community. Fraternity is the principal value defended by communitarians, which is only achievable in a society where the agents recognize it is their participation in and membership of a community that entitles them to receive benefits and creates their personal qualities (including character and talents). As a result, the idea of personal desert and merit become less important, or, as some drastic communitarians would say, irrelevant. Sandel’s position is radical in this aspect. He argues that social communitarian values go before justice, which arises only in the absence of the former<sup>41</sup>. As a consequence, some communitarians aim for an educational system that goes beyond

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<sup>38</sup> (Dahlberg, 2014, p. 163)

<sup>39</sup> (Pogge, 1989, p. 87)

<sup>40</sup> See more in (MacIntyre, 1981) (Sandel, 1982) (Sandel, 1992) (Taylor, 1998)

<sup>41</sup> (Sandel, 1982)

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personal success to focus on fostering citizenship based on virtues, rights and responsibilities in a harmonious relationship between schools and families. This is the reason that the social justice spirit of the difference principle cannot be lexically inferior to FEO<sup>42</sup>.

### 4.3.- The egalitarian debate about equality

So far, I have argued that FEO should not have lexical priority over the difference principle. Now, it is possible to find an alternative principle to EofO. The debate to define the currency of egalitarianism is helpful in determining this new principle, but such debate still has a limited scope because it does not contemplate the interactions and relations between human beings. For this reason, I use Cohen's proposal, to which by applying a communitarian perspective, I give a broader scope.

Given the limitations of meritocracy and FEO, equality of opportunity for welfare appears an interesting alternative conception of EofO<sup>43</sup>. In this view, all that matters is that individuals receive equal opportunities for welfare regardless of their abilities and background. For supporters of this version, inequalities in welfare are acceptable if and only if they are the result of an agent's rational choice. For example, if someone prefers to stay at home watching football and playing with his children, he could choose to work in a part-time job, and, therefore, receive less income than another person who works full-time. In other words, nothing but personal choice should affect welfare.

It is important to notice that this account is different to equality of welfare, which has been widely criticized by egalitarians<sup>44</sup>. Since the 1980s the debate has been focused on finding what unites egalitarians, i.e., the currency of egalitarianism. Rawls makes the strong point that welfare is not the ideal currency, arguing that it is neither possible nor

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<sup>42</sup> (Etzioni, 1993)

<sup>43</sup> This account is extended reviewed in (Arneson, 1989)

<sup>44</sup> See (Rawls, 1999) (Dworkin, 1981) (Arneson, 1989) (Cohen, 2011) (Sen, 1979)

responsible to treat luxury preferences and modest pleasures on a par with each other. He argues that people should be responsible for their actions and decisions. Thus, the claims of those with expensive preferences are not worthy of consideration because of their “lack of foresight or self-discipline<sup>45</sup>”. Therefore, equality of welfare is not a fair principle to follow.

Most interesting, though, is Cohen’s response to Arneson’s equality of opportunity for welfare. Cohen says that he is a firmly admirer of Arneson’s work, but he considers that his theory is insensitive to some inequalities. Cohen says clearly<sup>46</sup>:

Equality of opportunity for welfare is a better reading of egalitarianism than equality of welfare itself is, but it is not as good as what currently strikes me as the right reading of egalitarianism, namely, that its purpose is to eliminate *involuntary disadvantage*, by which I (stipulatively) mean disadvantage for which the sufferer cannot be held responsible, since it does not appropriately reflect choices that he has made or is making or would make.

His proposal, then, is *equal access to advantage*<sup>47</sup>. For Cohen, “advantage is a broader notion than welfare. Anything which enhances my welfare is *pro tanto* to my advantage, but the converse is not true.<sup>48</sup>” Besides, access is better than opportunity because “opportunities are the same whether you are strong and clever or weak and stupid: if you are weak and stupid, you may not use them well – but that implies that you have them<sup>49</sup>.” In this sense, he treats everything that an agent has as something that he can have access to. This means that a person can have access to welfare and therefore access is broader than opportunity.

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<sup>45</sup> Quotation made in (Cohen, 2011, p. 10)

<sup>46</sup> (Cohen, 2011, p. 13)

<sup>47</sup> As he says, access is used in a noncompetitive sense and advantage is broader than welfare.

<sup>48</sup> (Cohen, 2011, p. 14)

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*

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This alternative to currency is very attractive for egalitarian discussion and especially interesting in relation to the obviousness of EofO. To eliminate luck, his alternative currency decides if a deficit in welfare should be compensated or not based only on the agent's personal choice. Cohen, by doing this, includes the responsibility of agents for their own decisions, making it easier to determine justice in egalitarian terms. As suggested earlier, I admit that this is a strong and demanding egalitarian proposal, and should be adjusted to incorporate personal interactions, so as to extend its scope.

The debate, between Cohen and other egalitarians, on the correct currency for egalitarianism neglects one important view: that equality should not consider only the possible personal claims of the agents and how to compensate their misfortune, but also the complex interactions between the different people involved. Even though equal access to advantage is, in my view, the best and a necessary principle to defend people's dignity, it is not sufficient to ensure a good life within a community. A society where everyone receives equal consideration can be said to be fair, but that does not mean that solidarity and fraternity exists between people. It is important to consider the role of relationships in a community, and the tension between this and personal autonomy.

Harry Brighouse suggests that egalitarians have not yet been able to integrate different approaches to equality. He argues that attaining equality has been seen as requiring the achievement of equality in education and related resources solely in order to get a good job, rather than promoting equality with regard to respect, recognition, love, care, and solidarity, which are the basis of a fulfilled life<sup>50</sup>. In this respect, egalitarian's good intentions have been, in my view, thwarted because of the wrong emphasis on the allocation and attainment of material resources. Some may say that EofO can refer to respect, love, etc. as well, but normally is not applied to social policy in this way. Also, EofO is premised on an individualistic worldview so it does not foster

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<sup>50</sup> (Brighouse, 2007)

solidarity or fraternity. The point made by Brighthouse opens the analysis to other variables, others than wealth, that are closer to human dignity. As he points out, “The corollary is that schools which devote resources to preparing these students well for participation in the labor market jeopardize the relationships that ground these children’s lives<sup>51</sup>.” Brighthouse’s conclusion is useful in creating a principle that bridges the seemingly contrary desirables of personal dignity and community membership.

### **5.- From Equality of Opportunity to Equality of Access to Democratic Citizenship**

Bringing back the communitarian conception of the self and Cohen’s response to the incentives talented people are given by the difference principle, an alternative account must preserve the social-individual and strengthen social values such as empathy. Anderson’s *democratic equality* is a good approximation of what we are looking for. She defines her account as egalitarian in the “conception of just relationships among citizens, but sufficientarian in its conception of justice in the distribution of resources and opportunities<sup>52</sup>,” where ‘sufficient’ means that everyone should have enough to secure an equal relationship between citizens. According to this view<sup>53</sup>,

This theory conceives of equality not as a pattern in the distribution of goods, but as a status relation among people. It is a condition marked by an absence of oppressive relationships (subordination, subjection to violence, marginalization, etc.), and effective access to the resources, skills, knowledge and spaces of civil society needed to interact as an equal with other citizens in civil society.

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<sup>51</sup> (*Ibid*, p. 154)

<sup>52</sup> (Anderson, 2004, p. 9)

<sup>53</sup> (*Ibid*, pp. 105-106)



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A weak aspect of her account is that she explicitly declares that inequalities after the sufficient resources do not matter. She says “On this view, as long as everyone has enough to function as an equal, inequalities beyond this threshold are not of particular concern<sup>54</sup>.” However, determining the level at which inequalities become irrelevant may prove an obstacle to her own conception of ‘just relationships’. Moreover, after the minimum she says must be provided for everyone, other resources must be allocated in a truly open competition. This idea is, at least, counterproductive because it undermines desirable social cohesion as it was described earlier. Still, she succeeds in her analysis that a new view of EofO is needed which is closer to communitarian values and the requirements of community life.

I suggest that a possible alternative to equality of opportunity, understood as equal chances to flourish for equally talented people, is a modified *equality of access to advantage* combined with *democratic equality* which I will call **equality of access to democratic citizenship**. Like Cohen, I maintain the word ‘access’ and not ‘opportunity’, for the reasons explained before, but make its scope even broader. Radcliffe, in her work, reinterprets opportunity in a way that is adequate for our purpose. She describes it as<sup>55</sup>:

a rough term for the ability to make our lives take whatever direction we want them to take, rather than to achieve any particular end; and when it is understood in this way it becomes a candidate for recognition as the most fundamental kind of human good, in competition with such others as happiness and wellbeing and money, and in the same general area as Rawls’ primary social goods, Sen’s capabilities and functionings, and various accounts of positive liberties.

In Radcliffe’s new understanding opportunity appears as one life’s value in itself, not just as means to achieve a particular vision of success. By extension, in this proposal, ‘access’ should be read as a

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<sup>54</sup> (Anderson, 2004, p. 106)

<sup>55</sup> (Radcliffe R, 1997, p. 274)

guarantee for fairly distributed dignity among citizens rather than as merely a chance for such fair dignity<sup>56</sup>. A consequence of this vision is that an analysis of desert or merit is not necessary. If everyone receives equal treatment in life it is inconsistent to think that some deserve that treatment or should have merit for it. In other words, EofO becomes redundant.

Thus, by following EofO people gain their position in society by competing for their dignity. However, if we aim for *equality of access to democratic citizenship* we do not have to fight for our role in society, we just have to decide what kind of life we want to live and assume our responsibilities. As social responsibility is founded on every member of the community, talented people will work not only for their own benefit but also for the benefit of the unskilled.

## 6.- Implications

The implications of this account are complex but significant. As it was said at the beginning of this dissertation, to achieve EofO societies have put a lot of pressure on education. Having presented two criticisms of EofO, and proposed an alternative principle, I now consider how the education system could be changed in line with my argument. Because *equality of access to democratic citizenship* has connections with communitarian values, I begin by considering what communitarians have to say about education.

What follows is not something radically new. Education can be thought of as a social process having two aims that merge into one purpose. On the one hand, it should foster the development of every individual who attends school. This development should reflect their personal interests and desires. The education process must emphasize individually appropriate intellectual, emotional and physical growth, to promote happiness, freedom and individual autonomy. It is convenient

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<sup>56</sup> A compatible but different proposal can be found on Singer's equal consideration of interests. See (Singer, 1993)

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for us to call this aim 'personal education'. On the other hand, education should have a central role in the construction of a society. Communitarians "see public life as a constitutive feature of human identity, and thus a necessary part of a good life and valuable for its own sake, not simply as an instrument for purely private ends,<sup>57</sup>" which requires then that every individual should receive preparation and tools to be a responsible member of society. In other words, to be a good citizen you need to learn, to share with and tolerate different people<sup>58</sup>. I will name this second aim, 'collective education' which is the aim EofO forgets.

These two aims should be incorporated to create one exclusive purpose of education. The idea that personal education is interconnected with collective education is based on the premise that an agent's flourishing is only made possible by collective flourishing. In this sense, a school's role is to help students realize their human significance in relation to a community rather than isolation.

For communitarians like Amitai Etzioni education has a core role in communitarian theory, because schools' most important goal should be socializing moral values and they should be principally focused on character formation. They see schools as places to share experiences and define them as the "second line of defense" after families. As Arthur suggests, "The aim of the ethos of the school would be to build up a moral tenor and a sense of responsibility."<sup>59</sup>

Some people may argue that, through citizenship education, schools today are already providing collective education. However, although I see the value of such programmes they are a remedial policy: necessary under the circumstances, but neither sufficient nor sustainable for building social cohesion and shaping responsible citizens. A good programme can help, but unless a school is consciously designed in a strategic and systemic way to provide a

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<sup>57</sup> (Daleney, 1994, p. 97)

<sup>58</sup> (Dewey, 1916)

<sup>59</sup> (Arthur, 1998, p. 361)

sense of responsibility and civic cooperation (which are antidote to competition and individualism) it is impossible to provide citizenship with just a few hours a week.

Besides, most current values transmitted at school are commonly a side effect of what critical thinkers have called the ‘hidden curriculum.’ In other words, all the unintentional learnings, positive or negative, that are not planned in the formal curriculum form an important proportion of students outcomes of the school system. Moreover, most of the time these side effects are responsible for the perpetuation of inequalities because this hidden curriculum teaches according to each social class<sup>60</sup>. So, the nature of collective education is not just to teach how to be a good citizen, but also to design an inclusive and diverse system where the learning process is not from teacher to students but is multi-directional where students also teach each other collaboratively. The value of community and the participation in that community is central in this process and has given rise to the development of schools as ‘learning communities’<sup>61</sup>.

One would expect defenders of EofO to claim that this structure, offers us no incentives to develop our talents. However, as I said before, this objection is answered by Cohen’s critique of the lexical priority of fair equality of opportunity over the difference principle. Moreover, the contemporary pressure on schools to offer students opportunities could be eliminated if they followed equal access to democratic citizenship. Without having an incentive to compete, they can focus their work and curriculum on personal flourishing and social values, rather than labor market training. In this way, within a communitarian view, even though schools are the “second line of defense”, they are just one of the social institution that builds personal character and social cohesion. Then, the

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<sup>60</sup> Hidden curriculum theory is a big concern in areas such as philosophy of education, critical theory, among others. For more details about it see (Jackson, 1974) (Bernstein, 1971)

<sup>61</sup> There are very notable examples around the globe that show the impact and benefits of a collective approach. See for example (García Yeste et al, 2013) (Santiago Rincón-Gallardo, Richard Elmore, 2012)

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responsibility lies with family, cooperatives, cultural communities and civil society organizations, among others.

### **7.- Conclusion**

In this work it has been presented a challenge to the commonly accepted idea that equality of opportunity is something obviously good, where equality of opportunity is understood as the minimum conditions that must be offered to equally talented people, who are equally willing to use their talents, so they can flourish under equal conditions. Almost all contemporary societies defend the idea that schools are the place to offer equality of opportunity. Therefore, parents and governments aim for the elimination of all possible obstacles to the achievement of personal success, including discriminatory rules based on race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc<sup>62</sup>. This popular account mandates that a talented poor student should have equal opportunities to compete for success as a talented rich student, leaving aside compensating for the differences created by their contrasting socio economic backgrounds.

The obviousness of equality of opportunity has led countries to try to promote all kinds of remedial policies, but, as it has been argued, this is the first argument to show that it is impossible to achieve the ideal of equality of opportunity. What I have shown is that by following a compensatory strategy the government will never be able to level the field. Wealthier families will always be able to invest more in their children's future, a fact that governments cannot ban. The only and immediate Government's response is to create more remedial policies, which leads to a vicious and unconstructive endless circle.

Moreover, I have argued that if it were possible to achieve, it would not be desirable. To sustain this argument I have pointed to the loss of

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<sup>62</sup> Peter Western argues that the existence of an opportunity depends on three components: an agent; a goal; and the obstacles to achieve it. See (Western, 1985)

social values such as fraternity, solidarity and empathy, which are the basis of a life in community.

Then, I have made a critique to meritocracy looks to defend people with merit and who make effort, and how under such logic, society will always have winners and losers and consequent inequality. The difference in this case, is that inequality would be created by human genetic differences, causing a new low-class of unskilled people and a new upper-class inhabited by talented people. Besides this, I have shown that the use of talent only for personal benefit is questionable because it is possible to make a distinction between the use and the ownership of our talents.

Next, I have argued against Rawls' second principle of justice. First, I have said that, as meritocracy, fair equality of opportunity only offers justice to talented people, but it does not consider what happen to the unskilled. When Rawls responded to this critique by introducing the difference principle, he retained it in a lexically inferior level to fair equality of opportunity. That lexical order, I have claimed, it is not justifiable primarily for two reasons. The first one, the election of fair equality of opportunity over the difference principle hides a sense of self-made person, which has its basis on the epistemic idea of the self. Then, I have offered a communitarian response to the Rawlsian liberal conception of the self, that implies that the whole Theory of Justice could be challenged from its initial assumptions at the original position, and also, that the sense of desert does not have a strong basis. The second reason against the superiority of fair equality of opportunity principle is because, as Cohen says, talented people should not be moved to work for the benefit of the community only by financial reward, but by the mere fact that they are part of that community, otherwise, they would not be accepting the essential nature of the difference principle, and that would be a contradiction because, it supposes that, all rational agents in the original position are theoretically in agreement with it.

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After that, I have defended Cohen's proposal of equality of access to advantage, as an alternative to equality of opportunity for welfare. However, I have argued that his argument for the currency for egalitarians does not have a sound answer to communitarian principles defended in the present dissertation. So, I have combined his account with Anderson's argument for equality of democratic citizenship to offer a new principle. Thus, I have proposed a principle that I called *equality of access to democratic citizenship*.

This alternative principle opens the possibility of offering every human being equal treatment based on the mere fact that we all deserve our dignity to be respected. This should not depend on our talents, effort or any other personal characteristics that are the result of fortune's lottery. At the same time, *equality of access to democratic citizenship* also prizes community social relations. This means that personal responsibility and moral values are reliant on the construction and development of the self. Thanks to that, gifted people will still be able to practice their talents for their own benefit, but also, for the benefit of unprivileged, who are now not subjected to their tyranny when, under the difference principle, they demand a reward for doing the same work.

I admit the difficulty of accepting this challenge and changing the way we think. But at least I wanted to question the obviousness of a slogan we all support. As Renata Salecl argues, "before we do any social critique, it is necessary really to lift that veil of obviousness and to think through a little bit differently<sup>63</sup>." The complexity of this is not trivial. The issue today is we may want to change the direction of how schools are designed, from pursuing equality of opportunity to ensuring equality of access to democratic citizenship, but the job market and the capitalist model are still too strong. They do not allow schools to use their limited resources to educate individuals' emotions and social values appropriately<sup>64</sup>. However, this does not mean we should still be aiming

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<sup>63</sup> In her TED-Talk about "Our Unhealthy Obsession with Choice" (Salecl, 2014)

<sup>64</sup> (Brighouse, 2007, p. 154)

for equality of opportunity, which, as it has been shown, should be dropped in favour of a superior formulation. The moral of this work, then, is that it should be mandatory to rethink what a society that achieves an absolute level of equality of opportunity would be like, and, if what I have argued is correct, we should throw EofO away and start looking for a different path, where I have offered one possible alternative, but as Radcliffe suggests, “since it is widely taken for granted that equality of opportunity is a good thing” a new proposal would “probably [be] a political non-starter<sup>65</sup>.”

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<sup>65</sup> (Radcliffe R, 1997, p. 278)



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