

The Meritocratic Myth:  
Merit in a World Characterized by Inequality of Opportunity

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The world is becoming increasingly aware of its deep-rooted inequalities, which some categorise as injustices. People across borders have become cognisant of the severe inequalities plaguing human civilisations, wealthy yacht-owning capitalists coexisting with people struggling to find a shelter from the storms of hunger, bereft of necessities. There are growing concerns about the fairness of a world that allows for such inequalities and prioritises luxuries for the few over basic survival needs of masses, with opulence living in a mansion next door to destitution. This has unfolded in the background of ongoing economic growth, a monopoly of world economic systems by capitalism, and its idea of a meritocratic world where anyone can be wealthy through effort, irrespective of the circumstances of their birth.

This essay aims to break down the idea of a meritocracy, arguing that it is instead a reflection of the inequalities of opportunity that exist in our society and that the notion of meritocracy actively hinders policies aimed at creating a more egalitarian world. First, we characterise capitalism in order for further analysis of inequalities of opportunity. The facets of inequality of opportunity focused on will be access to wealth and income. Through a socio-economic analysis of these opportunities, we will establish that society is characterised by inequality of opportunity, which contrasts with the claims of meritocracy. Lastly, we will demonstrate how this narrative actively impedes the scope for policy action to correct inequalities. The essay utilises a more theoretical, broad-based understanding of societies rather than a focused study, and the principled results are reflective of most societies and replicable across contexts. Additionally, inequality across countries is one significant phenomenon, which is not addressed here as the framework of the essay primarily focuses on dynamics within societies.

The choice of equality of opportunity as the metric to judge the fairness of socio-economic structures allows for differential rewards to different levels of effort and other relevant personal factors. There should not be any structural differences in rewards given to people based on their circumstances. Inequality in results could still prevail, given it results from differences in personal attributes. The goal is to provide everyone with an equal starting point, post which they determine their life's course and gain appropriate rewards. However, the results are justified if the starting point and the process were both fair, and that will be our focus. Equality of opportunity allows us to distinguish between circumstances and individual action, reserving rewards only for the latter, and equalising the effect of the former. A socio-economic structure that exhibits equality of opportunity can be determined through the Rawlsian approach of a 'veil of ignorance'.<sup>1</sup> Rawls argued that an ideal society is one where people would be satisfied if their position in society was randomly determined, opportunities thus being equal for everyone irrespective of circumstances.

We can broadly understand inequality of opportunity as the unequal provision of opportunities for people in the same society due to their circumstances. The 'lottery of birth' or the 'accident of birth' are concepts used to describe the arbitrary determination of circumstances. Opportunity is a broad term that covers a wide variety of factors such as educational opportunities, healthcare access, opportunity to get a job, or more specifically, a well-paying job. These are all connected to an individual's welfare, and its core, inequality of opportunity is about the opportunity to access welfare. For this essay, the focus will be on opportunities in the economic market to earn a certain level of income.

Inequalities of opportunities result from human-created structures or rules that govern our economic exchanges and social lives. It is not a naturally existing phenomenon whose

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<sup>1</sup> John Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 118-123.

existence is a necessary consequence of some biological human difference or tendency. There are no relevant differences in people arising from the fact of their birth that would justify unequal access to opportunities. In some cases, like height consideration for playing basketball, natural differences could be relevant; however, for most opportunities, there are no naturally relevant considerations. The rules governing our socio-economic interactions are also arbitrary in that it is entirely feasible to imagine a world where the scales of privilege reversed such that those who are privileged under the current structures, find themselves at a disadvantage and vice versa. The crux of this argument is that the rules of socio-economic interaction that form the basis for inequalities of opportunity are not biologically or naturally ordained facts about human life. As humans created these structures, there is also scope for reforming them by revising the rules. Thereby, the ideal action is the socially-driven redefinition of rules underlining the structures. However, for this essay, we will constrain ourselves to more limited, policy-based action.

Inequalities plague our societies, including inequalities of opportunity as will be argued in this essay. Thereby, the rules governing such a society must also be unfair, contributing to these disparities. One such structure is capitalism which now governs economic interactions across the globe. Capitalism is itself variable, not a monolithic idea applied precisely similarly everywhere, yet there are certain standard features. These include the presence of private ownership, and economic activities carried out with a profit motive, along with economic decision-making through free markets. Various manifestations of capitalism will exhibit different levels of these features; however, we can define capitalism as some combination of these broad principles. Capitalism's evolution does not have a definitive history either. It emerged in various parts of the world during the last five centuries. The fall of feudal monarchies and feudal states often accompanied the rise of capitalistic ideas. Monarchies carried with them some version of a 'divine command' justifying the ruler's

elevated position in society by invoking the ordinance of some divine entity. Eventually, people challenged the divine command, awakening to the injustice of arbitrarily created inequalities by the ruling classes. However, the supposedly egalitarian societies that the overthrow of feudal monarchies should have created went missing. Instead, capitalism occupied the structural vacuum and justified inequalities in a revised manner.

Certain features of capitalism are essential to our analysis. One such idea is the Marginal Productivity Theory of Wages, which states that an individual's wages are proportional to the additional revenue generated by her effort. Thereby, the income accruing to a factor of production must be some function of the additional revenue they generate, or more broadly, the additional social welfare their effort creates. The other feature of capitalism resulting from the industrial revolution was the prevalence of capital-intensive production processes, which require large sums of capital investment. The increased importance of capital brought about an increase in the incomes accruing to capital, vis-à-vis the incomes accruing to labour. A more recently prevalent idea has been the idea of a meritocracy, where an individual's rewards are supposedly a function of their merit, i.e. their intrinsic quality rather than external factors. The notion of meritocracy espouses the idea that an individual has control over their life, and the rewards society will give them. It places the responsibility for outcomes within the individual, rather than her circumstances. The impact of this idea will be analysed further in the other parts of the text.

Capitalism is not the only-human created structure responsible for inequalities. Inequalities result from socio-economic structures which interact and intersect in different ways across societies. A structure that is prevalent across the world is the patriarchy, a system where men monopolise power and exclude women from it. More broadly, patriarchy prescribes many unjust notions about the treatment of people based on their identity, by

privileging cis-het men and disadvantaging anyone who identifies otherwise.<sup>2</sup> There also exist more contextualised social structure such as the caste system in India, and race in America. The characteristics of these structures include the unjust treatment of individuals based on some ascribed social identity, exclusion from opportunities like material wealth and public goods, and an attitude of discrimination combined with the belief that people from a particular social group are superior to other people.

### *Wealth and Income Inequalities*

The last few decades have witnessed an increasing concentration of wealth. The fairy tales of economic growth post the second world war accompanied a growing expanse between the top wealth owners of society and everyone else. In 2015, Oxfam reported that the wealth of the top 1% wealthiest people across the world had exceeded the wealth of the other 99%.<sup>3</sup> In 2015, 62 wealthiest individuals owned equivalent wealth to the bottom 50%, representing 3.6 billion people. This data reflects the profoundly concerning wealth inequalities prevalent across the world. Additionally, the 62 wealthiest individuals are composed of 53 men and just nine women, reflecting patriarchal barriers in access to wealth.

Wealth is primarily sourced through wealth acquisition by the individual herself and inheritance. The acquisition of wealth is ostensibly the result of some effort and made possible due to the individual's high income. We will elucidate on the inequalities of the income distribution later. The focus here is wealth acquired through inheritance and historical processes of wealth acquisition. The inheritance of wealth is entirely a circumstantial process. An individual does not determine the family or society into which she is born, and

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<sup>2</sup> An increasingly used term, cis-het refers to someone who is both cisgendered, i.e. identifies with gender assigned at birth, and heterosexual.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics from Oxfam's "An Economy for the 1%", the organisation releases yearly studies of wealth inequality across the world

consequently, the inheritance she will receive. A meritocratic system ought to minimise the effect of inherited wealth on access to opportunities and ensure that inheritance is not a vital determinant of an individual's welfare.

One driving force behind the high rewards associated with wealth possession is the ability to transform wealth into capital and utilise it for production processes. Capital-intensive production techniques have become the norm since the industrial revolution. Along with an abundance of labour-supply in most parts of the world, this results in capital's share of income being substantially high. Under the currently prevalent imperfectly competitive markets, capital-owners can set higher profit margins, as well as appropriate some of the income that would otherwise accrue to labour. More recently, technological developments in the information age have increased the focus on capital which now includes advanced technologies like artificial intelligence, further reducing the power of labour. There is also an increasing effort to automate processes that otherwise require human labour. These technologies would be owned by the wealthy and would create production processes that are not just capital intensive but can feasibly function with minimal human labour or none at all. Eventually, this presents a possible erosion of the already disproportionately low share of income accruing to labour from production processes.

Meanwhile, the share of income accruing to capital, which is already high, can be further inflated by such technology. Access to capital is heavily dependent on wealth. There are alternative means such as credit systems, but wealth is still the most natural way of accessing capital and thereby accessing the substantial rewards of capital-intensive production. Inherited wealth then allows people to convert it into capital and acquire even more wealth, i.e. wealth accumulation. It also allows them to access the incomes from capital which remain very high. As established, inherited wealth is purely circumstantial, and so the

benefits accruing from inheritance are also circumstantial and not reflective of any meritocratic ideas. Indeed, one requires some skills and knowledge to convert wealth into capital, but that barrier is quite surmountable, and wealth allows for better access to opportunities for skill development as well.

Inherited wealth is often an indicator of one's position on the social ladder. A large amount of inherited wealth acts as a static fund for an individual if she wishes to gain skills and get employment. Such individuals often have access to better educational institutions, in that they can ensure that their skill development happens at the very best institutes across the world due to their ability to afford such opportunities. They also get better access to health and can better develop potentialities through risk-taking, knowing that the inherited wealth will act as a safeguard in case their risk does not pay off. The last factor also becomes essential as such individuals can foray into activities which come with a significant risk of failure but also a massive payoff in case of success such as opening businesses, acting, or any other field where the best performers often monopolise the market. The security of wealth plays a crucial role in allowing for higher risk-taking for these individuals, whereas many others who could have had similar potential to succeed in these fields cannot access them at all owing to lack of safety nets.

One could argue that people accumulate wealth to pass it down as an inheritance to their offspring, and that is sufficient reason to justify people inheriting different amounts of wealth, as a cumulation of the efforts of their ancestors. The present differences in inheritance would only be fair if there were a fair starting point at some point in time and post that interactions happened through just rules. However, the history of wealth acquisition is a history of injustice rather than fairness. Even libertarians fail to provide an argument for the fairness of initial wealth acquisition. Private property was not a natural institution but one



created by humans, and so at some point in history, unowned property that could be utilised by everyone became owned by individuals. Such an action necessarily infringes upon the liberty of others to utilise that land, and thereby the libertarian justification for wealth accumulation collapses at the very first step. Even post that arbitrary acquisition of land, the processes defining wealth accumulation have been deeply unjust. Racism in America and casteism in India are explicit structures discriminating against social groups, excluding them from accessing resources, depriving them of socio-economic capital, and often preventing them from receiving any proportionate amount of the rewards of their labour.<sup>4</sup> These social groups faced structural barriers that prevented them from acquiring wealth, which continue to exist in more covert manners. However, even if we consider the argument that the aforementioned structural barriers no longer exist, the historical injustices persist as they were never corrected or accounted for properly. Thereby, the wealth ownership patterns of the present are a direct result of deeply unjust processes of exclusion and exploitation. As a result of the process as well as the initial point of wealth acquisition being unfair, the inequalities arising out of them are also unfair. Recalling the earlier argument, we can conclude that rewards accruing to wealth, especially inherited wealth, are extremely unjust and contrary to any notion of a meritocratic society.

The other form of inequality widespread across the world is income inequality. Historic frictions of inequality have focused on disparities between income from capital and income from labour. However, recent times have witnessed incomes of specific skill sets and professions rocket, raising concerns over income inequalities. These incomes have increased enough to ensure that benefactors can often claim economic mobility and acquire wealth through market processes. According to the theory of marginal productivity, income

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<sup>4</sup> Deshpande, The 10% Quota, 2019, 28-29. In India, land ownership rate among poor upper caste groups is higher than the average of all scheduled caste groups.

inequality should ideally be a reflection of differential contribution by the individuals to societal welfare. However, the exponential increase in disparities is hard to justify through this theory, case in point is America, where the average CEO payoff is 278 times the average worker wage.<sup>5</sup> A possible explanation of this disparity is that capital-owners give high-level managers and CEO's extra incentive to increase profits by giving them a share in the massive income accruing to capital, allowing for burgeoning returns to capital-owners as well as large paycheques for such workers. While the fairness of such disparate payoffs is questionable, even if we were to take them as fair systematic rules, the access to these payoffs remains unequal and heavily dependent on circumstances.

Gaining employment in a particular field requires possession of the skill sets required to perform the tasks associated with it. In a just world, an individual would have all skill sets accessible to her, and she could choose whatever career she wanted to pursue, knowing the associated rewards. However, learning skill sets is dependent on educational exposure, which is unequally distributed. The spread of access to education is unequal across the lines of socio-economic identities in most parts of the world. There exist some nations like Iceland whose path-breaking welfare systems have created an efficient public education network that discards the need for any private education; however, it remains an anomaly. Most societies are characterised by educational access being highly dependent on economic background, as well as social identity. The quality of public education that is openly accessible is abhorrent compared to the gated havens of private education that impart top-quality learning. Wealthy parents are able and willing to pay exorbitant amounts to educate their children at world-class institutions, which remain inaccessible to most of the population. While the gulf of educational quality is massive at the school level, it gets worse with colleges wherein only

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<sup>5</sup> Dominic Rushe, The Guardian, 2019. The phenomenon of income disparities is extensively covered in media coverage post the global financial crisis.

people with enough resources can afford the rising costs of higher education. College costs create a further bottleneck in terms of educational level an individual can access, again determined by their circumstances. The economic class one is born into directly determines her educational level as well as the quality of education, which dictate skill acquisition. Skills learnt from education are a crucial determinant of the employment opportunities available to an individual, and so people's life path is influenced by their economic circumstances in significant ways.

Economic class is not the only determinant of an individual's access to the job market, as social identities ascertain the rules of an individual's participation in society. Social discrimination and barriers function to exclude individuals from accessing opportunities despite fulfilling the otherwise prescribed criteria. People from the same economic class belonging to different social groups receive different treatment due to their identity. Even the provision of welfare programs or admissions to schools or colleges can suffer from skews due to societally existing prejudices clouding the judgement of decision-makers, whether overtly or covertly. We have already laid out how social groups across the world faced injustices, including the exclusion from wealth acquisition, which in turn is a crucial determinant of access to education and skills. However, the effect of social inequalities is not just limited to getting education and skills, but also extends to the job market itself. Prejudicial behaviour, structural discrimination, and biased beliefs ensure the exclusion of people from disadvantaged sections for jobs and positions for which they completely fulfil the criteria. It also results in differential rewards for people with the same productivity, skillset, and position as exemplified by the well-acknowledged gender wage gap. Thereby, neither is access to skill equally accessible nor are the terms of participation in the job market. These realities stand in contrast to the meritocratic ideal of rewards received being proportional to effort.

## *Policy Implications*

Inequality of opportunity is undesirable for a multitude of reasons. Ethically, individuals should not be treated differentially based on any socially constructed identity. The equality of humans is a widely accepted notion, implying that there are no relevant differences in people's characteristics that would justify unequal treatment. Inequality of opportunity is unfair structural discrimination that violates this principle of human equality. Theoretical equality does not necessarily translate to substantive equality, and although countries across the world have some measure of the former, there is an absence of substantive equality. A fair world entails equal treatment in practice and not just in theory.

Pragmatic considerations also make inequality undesirable. Many economists have justified a certain level of inequality in society by arguing that it stimulates growth and development, and the presence of extraordinarily privileged or wealthy individuals can benefit the society as a whole and increase cumulative welfare, or increase the size of the pie to be shared. However, such theories have proven fallacious as the promise of trickle-down economics has failed to deliver. The reality is one where the wealthy claim a significant portion of the pie without adding enough value to justify such inequality. While the benefits of inequality have proven to be non-existent, the harms continue to plague societies. Inequality of opportunity prevents people from accessing certain professions where they could potentially excel. There could be countless potential artists, musicians, scientists, or intellectuals who never got the opportunity to explore that potential due to the circumstances of their birth, lack of exposure and unavailability of safety nets. Aside from such missed opportunities for enhancing social welfare, there are more direct consequences of inequalities. Economic inequality is associated with higher rates of health problems and a

lower life expectancy.<sup>6</sup> There is also a positive correlation with crime rate indicators like homicides and incarceration rates.<sup>7</sup> Studies have found that people in more equal societies are also more likely to trust each other.<sup>8</sup> These are all directly negative consequences of inequalities structurally resulting from inequality of opportunities, that require interventions.

Inequalities threaten the democratic processes that proudly underline our societies. Elections fought with massive corporate funding inevitably result in political processes built to serve the interests of the wealthy, creating a symbiotic nexus between the economically wealthy and the politically powerful, excluding large sections of society from fair access to democratic power. Even the principle of one person, one vote is being upended in practice which is more reflective of the notion 'one dollar, one vote'. Wealth and social power are strong determinants of narratives prevalent in society and significantly determine voting patterns. Media houses, which play a crucial role in transmitting relevant information to individual voters, are increasingly controlled by those with socio-economic power, effectively controlling information channels that represent the fourth pillar of democracy. They actively intervene to proliferate narratives through the spread of selective information, in order to further their interests. These deliberate actions are reflective of socio-economic asymmetries resulting from inequality of opportunity transforming the nature of political processes and resulting in unrepresentative democracies wherein people are denied fair access to information that is crucial to their decision-making.

Consequently, the implication for any welfare-concerned democratic state is action targeted at reducing the inequality of opportunity. Necessarily, these actions would be redistributive, aimed at creating a level playing field with the end-goal of an entirely

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6 De Vogli R et al, 2005. Strong negative correlation between income inequality and life expectancy at birth,  $r=-0.864$ .

7 Neopolitan, 1999.

8 Uslaner et al, 2003.

egalitarian society where circumstances would be irrelevant to an individual's life outcomes. Healthcare and education are primary needs which must be provided for through public enterprise. The existence of private enterprise in these areas hinders the equal provision of opportunity, and there are multiple avenues to counter that. The Iceland model entails the creation of efficient public systems that eliminate the space for private enterprise. Harsher alternatives include the prevention of private educational and health institutions; however, such banning might impinge on freedom unnecessarily. Consequently, the most viable alternative is proper regulation of private institutions and imposing affirmative action policies like mandatory service provision to socio-economically disadvantaged groups, while striving to make public institutions more efficient. Affirmative action policies are crucial interventions to counter social exclusion, challenges that continue to exist in society wherein merit and skills can prove inadequate owing to prejudicial beliefs.

Welfare policies require substantial amounts of resource investment. The means of raising these resources available to most countries across the world is taxation. Accordingly, we need stringent progressive taxation systems that heavily tax very high incomes, along with some form of wealth taxation. Wealth tax by itself fails to distinguish between wealth acquisition by individuals which could result from individual effort and inherited wealth resulting from circumstances. Thereby, it is essential to institute high inheritance taxes that aim to raise resources while simultaneously levelling the playing field by reducing the induced privilege of inheritance. Governments must have a will to raise taxes, which requires politics to reduce the leverage held by the wealthy through laws that prevent, or at least reduce corporate influence on electoral processes. However, there exists a widely acknowledged risk of wealthy citizens leaving the country and shifting to so-called tax havens. It becomes vital that such taxation is brought about by internationally coordinated action. These policy suggestions might seem unrealistic to some, and that is a consequence of

widespread resistance to redistributive policies. The last part of this essay seeks to demonstrate how the notion of meritocracy is culpable in the creation of this resistance.

Meritocracy espouses individualistic causation for outcomes, wrongly informing the disadvantaged sections of society that their suffering results from their inaction and inadequacy of effort. Concurrently, privileged groups find comfort in the idea that their position in society and welfare level results entirely from their merit and determination. This narrative often pedestallizes individuals from disadvantaged groups who manage to have a successful life despite their circumstances, to argue that society is indeed meritocratic, ignoring countless others whose lives continue to be heavily determined by their circumstances. There is no denying that individual effort is an essential determinant of outcomes. However, in placing the locus of control over outcomes entirely within the individual, the idea of meritocracy as it exists in society ignores structural disadvantages as well as privileges. The notion that any individual, no matter where she is born, can access the highest rewards in society implies that welfare is purely a function of personal factors like effort and dedication. Through our deconstruction of inequality of opportunities, we have established that welfare is, in practice, determined significantly by one's socio-economic context, or where one is born in society.

The idea of meritocracy arrived when there already existed significant social differences in access to resources and opportunities. It made obscure social privileges by shrouding them under the notion of merit-based rewards and helped structurally overlook them. Michelle Obama shocked American society by mentioning that slaves built the White House.<sup>9</sup> America is structurally oblivious to the fact that the origins of large portions of wealth owned by white people trace back to the exploitation of African-American people

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<sup>9</sup> Waxman, 2016

through the explicitly exploitative structure of slavery. Despite an ostensible dismantling of the structure, there were no fully corrective measures for the history of injustices which meant that white people and African-Americans were never at a level starting point. While there exist other sociological and epistemological factors behind this, one of the reasons for the structural obfuscation of privilege is the idea of meritocracy that convinces an average white person that their ability to access a certain level of education, go to college, and get high-paying jobs directly results from their effort, and not privilege inherited from exploitative structures.<sup>10</sup> In India, there has been consistent backlash and uproar against reservation, an example of affirmative action. The privileged caste groups, or Savarnas, feel wronged that people from the disadvantaged sections, or Dalits, get reserved seats in educational institutions and jobs due to their birth identity, feeling that it discriminates against them and does not reward merit. The feeling of being wronged and the single-minded emphasis on merit results from the obfuscation of privileges through the flawed notion of society being meritocratic. An identification and cognisance of structural disadvantages would lead to the realisation of the flawed nature of meritocracy, and recognition of circumstances as a determinant for outcomes.

The consequences of this ignorance created by meritocratic narratives are twofold. It creates intense resistance to any redistributive policies which dilute the wealth and welfare enjoyed by privileged groups, who argue they have justly earned their possessions. These groups have resisted, in India's case violently so, affirmative action policies as well as increases in taxation. There is a pushback on policies aimed at higher taxes by the wealthy who are convinced that they fairly earned their wealth/income entirely through effort, and the government wrongfully redistributes their resources to those who did not dedicate enough

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<sup>10</sup> Mills, *White Ignorance*, 2007. Mills utilised an epistemological lens.



effort to succeed. The flipside is the possible world where acknowledgement of privilege and its role in determining outcomes replace narratives of meritocracy. There would be a clear understanding of the importance of circumstances in defining outcomes and the underlying deeply unfair structural discriminations. Studies have documented a preference for fairness among people to the extent that they would trade-off efficiency for increased fairness.<sup>11</sup> There is a deep sense of angst that accompanies the awareness of living in an unjust society. A world where people are compelled to confront their privilege would be a more conducive world for social justice action, and policies aimed at the creation of a more egalitarian world.

José Ortega y Gasset wrote, “Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia”, which translates to: “I am: I and my circumstance”.<sup>12</sup> Meritocracy structurally ignores circumstances in its measurement of a person’s worth, thereby privileging those whose circumstances were more favourable than others’. In an ideal world, circumstantial factors would not affect an individual’s life outcomes. However, in a socially unjust world, this ignorance turns structural, becoming an injustice of itself, placing the onus on individuals who have been structurally disadvantaged to alleviate their suffering even when their circumstances function against them, and allowing other groups to benefit while being blissfully unaware of their privilege. This essay argues that this notion of meritocracy is flawed due to the existing inequalities of opportunity; and that it is an active impediment to policies aimed at rectifying these injustices. Thereby, the tryst to alleviate inequalities must concurrently dismantle the notion of meritocracy as it currently exists, in order to move towards an egalitarian future.

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<sup>11</sup> Starmans et al., Why People Prefer Unequal Societies, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> John E. Roemer, Equality of Opportunity, 15.

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