

Rolling the Dice on College:
A Luck Egalitarian Look at U.S. Higher Education Inequalities

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Introduction

Luck egalitarianism, or the idea that the only just inequalities are those due to choice as opposed to brute luck factors, provides a useful way to conceptualize educational inequalities. This paper, with a focus on the U.S. higher education system, argues that the inequalities in higher education are attributed to brute luck factors, which is why it is an injustice. I am focusing on 4-year colleges and universities when I discuss higher education, so I use higher education and college interchangeably, but the arguments extend with validity to additional graduate and professional schools. Section I of the paper discusses education as a positional good and argues that although it is, in fact, inherently positional, this is not the reason its inequalities are unjust. Instead, the reason educational inequalities are unjust is because of its connection to “brute luck”, morally arbitrary factors (including socioeconomic status, race, and gender), which section II addresses. Section III summarizes and supports Kristin Voigt’s factors of how brute luck affects the “choice” to attend higher education and how this leads to inequalities. In section IV, I will defend the claim that talents, just like any other brute luck factor, are morally arbitrary and do not justify unequal options. In section V, I conclude by discussing the real-world application of minimizing the effects of brute luck in the educational system.

I. Education: A Positional Good

While some assert the inequalities in higher education are due to its status as a positional good, I will argue that although higher education is, in fact, a positional good, this does not make it inherently unjust. A positional good is a good where the value is derived from the fact that

others do not have this good, i.e. it is better to have it while no one else has it than it is to have it while everyone else has it. For instance, winning first place in a foot race is positional because the value in winning first place comes from the fact that opponents did not. Conversely, food is not positional because it is satisfying and valuable to someone regardless of whether or not others have it. Note that many goods may have multiple reasons for being valuable, so it is plausible that goods can be somewhat or mostly positional, with only some attributes that derive value from the lacking of others.

Higher education, or education in general, is valuable for multiple reasons: preparation for future jobs, acquiring hireability for future jobs, intellectual and social development, and further benefits from the college experience. The factor that most obviously creates positionality, and hence the one I will focus on, is the hireability for future jobs. Employers are more likely to hire those with college degrees, and even more so for those with degrees from the most prestigious universities. Since applying for jobs is an inherently competitive process, the value of a college education on a resume is only as valuable, in terms of hiring, as the scarcity of it among other applicants. A common analogy that Martin Hollis mentions is that “standing on tiptoe is good for some but only if others stay put.”¹ The hireability aspect of higher education is an important enough part of its value, so therefore it is reasonable to say that higher education is a positional good.

I will now argue that the injustice in education inequality is not due to the fact that it is a positional good. An implication of this is that positional goods are not necessarily unjust, which in the application of education, means there could be a place for competitive colleges in a just system. The existence of value in having something others do not, with the condition that

¹ Hollis, Martin. “Education as a Positional Good.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 16, no. 2 (1982): 237. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.1982.tb00615.x>.

everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve it, is not an injustice. To say all positional goods are unjust is to imply that any deviation from perfect equality (that is everyone having the exact same) is unjust, which would be an extreme form of egalitarianism that not only rids people of liberty by putting perfect equality above freedom of choice but is unrealistic for a well-running society. It is much more reasonable to say social structures should guarantee equality of opportunity, but beyond that outcomes can differ because we have free will in our life decisions.

Positional goods are not problematic unless (1) the reason for them being positional goods is problematic (they are not inherently positional) or (2) they are inherently positional but the inequalities are unjust for a different reason. From a luck egalitarian perspective, which I am utilizing in this paper, if people have a fair chance for a positional good and brute luck circumstances do not change this chance, a positional good could be just. While some may dislike it, the practice of gambling is not inherently unjust, as long as everyone truly has a fair chance to win. Again, that is not to say that a positional good cannot have inequalities that perpetuate injustice for another reason, but if a positional good satisfies this fair chance condition, the fact of it being a positional good is not an injustice. An example of a good that falls into category (1) would be voting rights in a context where voting rights are restricted. If an exclusively elite class gets to vote while others do not, they give themselves more of a say in government only because others do not have a say. The right to vote as a positional good is unjust for the reason that it should not be positional; everyone as citizens of a just democracy deserves the right to vote. The injustice seems obvious in this case.

Conversely, I argue, higher education inequalities are problematic and fit into case (2). In any form of a capitalist system, employers hiring employees is inevitable, and it is not an injustice for them to want people with certain experiences. Therefore, these experiences are

inevitably going to be positional, because if there is a scarcity of jobs, having desirable experiences others do not is valuable. This, inherently, is not an injustice. The reason for the injustice in education inequality is because of the unfair chances people have for getting an education. Section II will discuss this in more detail.

II. The Cause of Educational Injustice

Education is a multifaceted social structure with many attributes that can be just or unjust. I will focus on admissions and the inequalities in who does or does not have the chance to attend higher education. I previously explained why the inequality of some people receiving higher education while others do not is unjust for reasons other than the fact that higher education is a positional good. I will spend some time arguing that there is, nonetheless, an injustice in higher education admissions inequalities and conceptualize this injustice from a luck egalitarian perspective, showing that the inequalities result from brute luck factors.

According to a 2016 study, 90% of those in the highest socioeconomic status (SES) quintile attended college while 56% of the lowest did.² A 2019 study found that 29% of Black Americans aged 25 to 29 held at least a bachelor's degree while the percentage was 45% for White Americans in the same age category.³ In 2016, 33% of Hispanic adults above 25 had not completed high school while the percentage was 9% for White adults over 25.⁴ Clearly, there is a disproportionate lack of representation of marginalized groups in the higher education system,

² University of the People. "The Massive Opportunity Gap in American Universities," n.d. <https://www.uopeople.edu/blog/opportunity-gap-in-american-education/>.

³ "Factsheets: Black Students." *PNPI*, Factsheets, February 1, 2022. <https://pnpi.org/black-students/>.

⁴ Brey, Cristobal de, Lauren Musu, Joel McFarland, Sidney Wilkinson-Flicker, Melissa Diliberti, Anlan Zhang, Claire Branstetter, and Xiaolei Wang. *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2018*, n.d.

and factors including socioeconomic status and race are empirically shown to impact one's chance of attaining a college degree.

The intuition for luck egalitarianism is that institutions should aim to diminish inequalities that result from brute luck factors. Socioeconomic status and race are brute luck, in that people happen to be born into these situations and they can negatively impact one's life status and utility. There is nothing inherent about these demographic factors that provides a logical justification for inequalities among them to persist, meaning they are morally arbitrary: they do not have any relation to moral worth or desert. Thus, it is unjust that any of these factors affect whether or not someone has the option to go to college, since college is a morally valuable good in our society. Luck egalitarianism says justice requires that institutions should minimize the causal connection between arbitrary brute luck factors and disadvantage, and since the U.S. higher education system admissions reflects this connection, it is clearly an injustice.

Note that even though this paper aligns with and supports luck egalitarianism as a whole, the claims are specific enough to education that it is possible to reject luck egalitarianism as a large-scale distributive strategy while supporting a luck egalitarian way of conceptualizing education justice. In other words, it is feasible to agree with criticisms of luck egalitarianism as a way to organize all of society but support the idea that brute luck factors should not impact someone's educational opportunities. The only premise required is that inequalities based on morally arbitrary factors are unjust, which I will be taking for granted in the rest of the paper.

III. Voigt's Choice Factors For Education

The previous statistics show that educational disparities among demographic groups exist, but some may argue that since students choose whether to attend college, it is not an injustice. In other words, as more schools reform discriminatory acceptance practices, the only reason left for disproportions is individuals' decisions, so it is not a problem for justice. To show how the decision to go to college is actually largely construed by brute luck factors I will reconstruct and support an argument provided by Kristin Voigt. She explains how options, probabilities, utility/costs, and information/uncertainty all impact the existence of pure choice in attending higher education:

Options: A student only can be said to reasonably have an option if they, themselves consider it to be a feasible option. High school students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds might have to spend time working and would not even consider attending college, while students from upper socioeconomic class backgrounds might not see anything other than college as a feasible option.

Probabilities: The actual probabilities of being admitted to college as well as the perceived probabilities of being admitted can affect someone's ability to really freely choose whether to apply. Racial minorities, knowing the current disproportionality of the higher education system, might be dissuaded from even trying to attend college from a young age because they consider acceptance such a low probability. It is also popular for colleges to have application fees, which prevent low-income students from being able to apply to as many schools, decreasing the probability of acceptance.

Utility/Costs: Clearly the cost of attending higher education poses a financial burden to any family, so for some it is not even an option. The utility of higher education can also be seen as a risk that is disproportionately utility-maximizing or advantageous to wealthier students. For them, paying for education is financially feasible and the job prospects afterward will very likely make the gamble worth it (most students from upper class backgrounds would not even consider it a gamble). For other students, the difficulty in paying for college might not be compensated for in post-college utility so it becomes a much riskier choice.

Information/Uncertainty: The information about universities, majors, programs, scholarships, deadlines, and more influential parts of applying and getting accepted to colleges are largely affected by a student's familial and early educational background. If someone's parents attended college, they are statistically much more likely to. Also, students who attend high schools with SAT prep, college counseling, college fairs, and more opportunities to provide information about the college process have an advantage and are more likely to see college as a feasible option.

Voigt concludes that the mere existence of choice is not enough to justify unequal outcomes and that these unequal outcomes are, therefore, a problem of social justice.⁵ Her arguments and conclusions work in the context of luck egalitarianism, but I want to reiterate that the arguments in this paper are valid even if there is disagreement with luck egalitarianism as a distributive strategy. Many of the common arguments that luck egalitarianism is too harsh on people's option luck outcomes or that a luck egalitarian distribution does not do enough against

⁵ Voigt, Kristin. "Individual Choice and Unequal Participation in Higher Education." *Theory and Research in Education* : TRE. 5, no. 1 (March 2007).

oppressive structures⁶ need not apply here. All I am saying in this paper is that based on the idea that inequalities due to brute luck are unjust, current educational inequalities are unjust and justice requires reforms to diminish the effects of these circumstances on educational opportunities.

The idea that the existence of choice is not always equal is also supported by Derrick Darby, who explains how familial dynamics can impact the existence of choice. He focuses on magnet schools, which are “high-quality public schools” intended to improve educational opportunities for low-income students and argues that the existence of this choice is affected by brute luck factors. He argues that in low-income, particularly Black, families, parents are more likely to spend large amounts of hours working, which infringes their ability to research or advise applications for school choice options. Additionally, low-income familial contexts more commonly breed poor mental health in students that may give them a “dismissed capacity” to pursue superior school choice options as they may feel it is futile or hopeless.⁷ The existence of educational opportunities is not enough, and more reform needs to be done to ensure these choices actually minimize inequalities due to brute luck factors.

A common counterargument to these claims, or a potential problem frequently used to question luck egalitarianism, is the idea that the metaphysical impracticality of differentiating brute luck and choice deems the whole theory impractical. In other words, if choices are said to be largely influenced by brute luck, there is no need to end this line of causal reasoning, meaning every choice is ultimately not a choice and people have no free will. A solution John Calvert mentions is the distinction between a metaphysical conception of responsibility and a reasonably

⁶ Anderson, Elizabeth S. “What Is the Point of Equality?” *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (1999): 287–337.

⁷ Darby, Derrick, and Argun Saatcioglu. “Race, Inequality of Opportunity, and School Choice.” *Theory and Research in Education : TRE*. 13, no. 1 (March 2015).

moral sense of responsibility. By metaphysical logic, we might not really be responsible for any choices at all since they are all caused by conditions that we are not responsible for. Yet there is a difference between this idea and what we can reasonably hold people responsible for.⁸ It is not an easily definable line, and it makes more sense to distinguish case-by-case. Still, there is an intuitive argument for determining what choices we consider people to be morally responsible for. The legal system does so; criminal offenders with mental illness may receive a different sentence than those who do not, but anyone who commits murder will be held responsible for that murder. The use of this example is not to say that the legal system is necessarily just but to make the point that there is some intuition for the existence of a reasonably agreed difference between choices and brute luck. Voigt's reasoning forces us to consider the choice to go to college as more influenced by brute luck than we may currently think.

IV. Talents as Morally Arbitrary

As I have mentioned how morally arbitrary brute luck factors do not justify educational inequalities, I will discuss the connection between brute luck and talents with respect to education. I will argue that talents are morally arbitrary by first explaining how what we view as "talents" in people is largely due to brute luck circumstantial factors. Then I will discuss the case of individuals born with different intellectual capacities.

Development of education at a young age is, in a large part, influenced by social circumstances, forcing us to question the notion that "intelligent" people deserve more. As

⁸ Calvert, John. "Educational Equality: Luck Egalitarian, Pluralist and Complex." *Journal of Philosophy of Education*. 48, no. 1 (February 2014).

Sardoč asserts that “an appropriate conception of talent reveals the high impact that the social environment has on developed talents.”⁹ For talents such as athleticism, results of studies suggest that children who grow up in families that support their training by making financial, social, and logistic sacrifices are more likely to develop expertise.¹⁰ Regarding academic or intellectual talents, there is a correlation between participation in preschool programs and high school completion, showing that situations from a young age set up some, and not all children for success. There is also evidence that Black and Hispanic students have lower achievement in math and science, largely due to the fact that they have not pursued advanced programming in these areas. This is because those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may not have support systems to motivate them and therefore consider learning math to be “lacking in utility”, being discouraged from seeking help or even enrolling in math classes.¹¹ College admissions look for talent through proxies such as grades, interviews, and test scores, which also reflect social situations. Students from wealthier families can afford private SAT or ACT tutors, while those from poorer families may have to spend time working to earn money instead of studying. The great influence of demographic factors implies that talents, including intelligence, are morally arbitrary and should not determine whether or not someone gets to go to college.

While a large part of talents are derived from social circumstances, there is evidence suggesting that some people are simply born more genetically gifted than others in areas

⁹ Sardoč, Mitja, and Tomaž Deželan. “Talents and Distributive Justice: Some Tensions.” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 8 (2021): 768–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1808021>.

¹⁰ Harwood, Chris G., Julie P. Douglas, and Antoinette M. Minniti. “Talent Development: The Role of the Family.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Sport and Performance Psychology*. Oxford University Press, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199731763.013.0025>.

¹¹ VanTassel-Baska, Joyce. “Disadvantaged Learners with Talent.” *Counseling and Human Development*, December 2008. Gale General OneFile.

associated with “intelligence”, including spatial abilities, memory, and quickness.¹² In this case, I will argue that there is a case for selective universities for the more gifted, but this does not diminish the fact that intelligence is morally arbitrary. As the Rawlsian equal opportunity principle says, those born with equal endowments deserve equal opportunities; people with equal natural intelligence should have the same educational opportunities.¹³ In an ideal society, there is a place for just, selective college admissions. More rigorous, intellectually stimulating institutions might attract those hardest working students with intellectual curiosity who want to be surrounded by others like them. By the same argument from Section I, the existence of this competition, in itself, is not unjust. College programs that specialize in the arts could have reasonable application requirements or assessments that are just because it makes sense to allow people suited for different jobs to be best equipped to pursue them. Having rigorous requirements for medical school or law school is not unjust in itself, because it makes sense and is best for society to have the most equipped people to pursue these careers. There is a reasonable connection between skills, physical or behavioral, and career paths that make sense and justify specialized education. The problem is not that the people with the best deliberative skills get to go to law school; the problem is that there are many people with superb deliberative skills that do not have this chance. The problem is not that Ivy league colleges exist but that they are so disproportionately favorable to rich white students.

Another relevant point discussed by Sardoč and Deželan is that many of these counterarguments argue irrationally that intelligent students deserve a better education because they have higher potential, yet they say nothing about giving different learners different

¹² Plomin, R., and I J Deary. “Genetics and Intelligence Differences: Five Special Findings.” *Molecular Psychiatry* 20, no. 1 (February 1, 2015): 98–108. <https://doi.org/10.1038/mp.2014.105>.

¹³ Rawls, *Original Edition*.

educational resources that cause them to reach comparable success. If one student requires more educational resources (i.e. a tutor) than another to reach the same level of ultimate success, since these differing talents are due to brute luck factors, there is not a rational justification against giving a less talented student the extra resources they need.¹⁴ Note, this applies to students that with different educational resources could reach the same level of intellect and does not apply to every case.

V. Conclusion

To reiterate, I argued that brute luck circumstances are morally arbitrary and should not determine whether or not someone gets to attend college. I will conclude by discussing what educational reforms might look like to guarantee luck egalitarian equality in academic opportunities. The injustice is that brute luck factors lead to inequalities, so reforms should work to eliminate these inequalities. Since much of the information and perceived choice of college comes from earlier primary schools, improving schools in low-income areas will increase the likelihood of college for these students. Improvements to schools should include extra educational resources to help struggling students and efforts to motivate all students to go to college. Colleges should also make ample efforts to provide information to all schools about their application policies, scholarships, and programs. Additionally, to avoid the unjust disparities in the financial burden and risks that exist in higher education, nationally funded tuition-free public schools should replace today's expensive universities. A solution to handling

¹⁴ Sardoč, Mitja, and Tomaž Deželan. "Talents and Distributive Justice: Some Tensions." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 8 (2021): 768–76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1808021>.

the current non-ideal educational structure would be to use affirmative action to provide more educational opportunities for marginalized groups and help offset the negative impact of brute luck situations. A luck egalitarian conception of justice requires that education reforms ensure that the conditions someone is born into do not affect their chance of higher education so ideally, every student has a seat at the college poker table.

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