

# Behavioral Genetics and Equality

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# Two Conceptions of Equality

- Equality of Opportunity
  - This may come under strong pressure from advances in behavioral genetics (BG)
- The equal moral worth of persons (EMWP)
  - This will not be shown mistaken by advances in BG
  - But **belief** in the EMWP might in practice be threatened

# Different Conceptions of Equality of Opportunity

- Formal Equality of Opportunity(E of O)—attacks legal constraints on freedom to compete.
- Fair E of O.
  - Qualifying conditions related to performance.
  - Removal of social and environmental barriers to success in competition.
- Fair E of O will still lead to unequal outcomes.
  - Genetic differences will be one of the main causes of inequalities.

# Genetically Based Inequalities—Unfair?

- Now we say—“sorry, nothing we can do about them.”
  - Though we may try to compensate for them in other ways.
- In the future—some may be correctable by some form of genetic intervention.
  - Or preventable by “selective” conception or abortion
  - E of O seems to provide a moral reason to do so.

# Likely Actual Implications of BG for Inequality

- Advances in BG may eventually lead to genetic interventions to enhance normal traits.
  - Intelligence is a good example because there is a wide range of normal variation.
- Enhancements will not be covered by health insurance, but available on an ability to pay basis.
  - The result will be an unfair exacerbation of inequalities.
    - The privileged would then be able to pass on natural as well as social advantages to their children
  - The complexity for policy—BG enhancements will confer both competitive and intrinsic benefits.

# Two Variants of the Equal Playing Field Account of E of O

- The Social Structural(SS) account—remove opportunity limiting effects of social injustices.
  - Emphasis on effects of injustice, not natural differences between persons.
- Brute Luck(BL) account—no lesser opportunities or disadvantages for persons from factors beyond their control.
  - No unchosen disadvantages.

- Both accounts have similar implications for social inequalities resulting from past injustice.
- Only the brute luck account requires directly countering the effects of the natural genetic lottery.

# The Example of Intelligence

- Normal intelligence varies within a wide range and in the absence of disease.
  - And has important effects on opportunities.
- A case--Adam and Bert both have IQs of 90.
  - Adam's is his “native intelligence.”
  - Bert's IQ had been 110, but was reduced by a neurological disease in childhood.
  - Is there any moral difference in what E of O should require to redress their limitations in opportunity?
    - By raising their IQs if possible?
    - By compensating them in other ways?

- SS account--counters effects of disease on opportunity.
  - Intervenes to help or compensate Bert, but not Adam.
- BL account—counters effects of unchosen disadvantages.
  - Adam and Bert both have claims to help or compensation, and equal claims.
  - Should intervene directly in the natural lottery to raise Adam's IQ if possible.

# Genetic Equality?

- Do BL theorists and resource egalitarians require equalization of natural assets? No.
- There are no fixed accounts of natural assets.
  - What counts as a natural asset or deficit is partly determined by the social structure.
  - The value of traits changes over time as the society's dominant cooperative framework changes.
- Value pluralism implies different views on what are, and the relative value of, natural assets.
  - Surface agreement often masks deeper disagreement—e.g. initiative.
  - Equivalent overall packages of natural assets would be even more controversial.

- A genetic “decent minimum” may be the appropriate goal if consensus on it is possible.

# BG and the Equal Moral Worth of Persons (EMWP)

- EMWP rests on a shared human nature
  - This grounds human rights
  - Controversy about what capacities or properties—reason, self-consciousness, language, agency, etc.
  - But beings that lack these properties lack EMWP
    - For example, bacteria, mice.
- EMWP is a threshold property—once reach the threshold, are a person with full human rights

# Enhancement of Behavioral Traits

- If and when enhancement becomes possible in the future, it would likely widen inequalities.
  - For example, forms of memory or intelligence.
  - Enhancement could raise some beyond the present normal range
    - Or even create capacities that we now lack.
  - “Human nature” would then have a much wider range

# Would this Make the EMWP False?

- Those at the lower end of the present range are still within the range necessary for EMWP
  - Even if the higher end of the range rises from enhancements, the unenhanced at the lower end would remain unchanged.
  - The unenhanced would still be above the necessary threshold.
    - So they would still be full moral persons with full human rights

# Practical Consequences of Greatly Widened Inequality

- Know from history greater risk of treating individuals as lacking EMWP if are viewed as very different and inferior
  - Slavery, Nazi eugenics
  - So, **belief** in EMWP could be undermined from greatly increased inequalities from enhancements, even if that undermining would not be **justified**

# Some Summary Implications

- BG at first shows us the genetic or natural contribution to various behavioral traits
  - But if genetic intervention enables us to alter those traits, they come under social control
  - This would lead these behavioral traits to move from the natural (beyond our control) to the social.
    - And thereby into the domain of justice.
- The colonization of the natural by the just.
  - If we can use genetic interventions to reduce disadvantages, E of O says to do so
  - But enhancements will erode E of O

- Widening inequalities in behavioral or other traits from genetic enhancement would not undermine the EMWP
  - But it could unjustifiably undermine **belief** in the EMWP.