Economic Inequalities and Choice:
A Reassessment of Ronald Dworkin’s Theory of Distributive Justice

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Abstract

This dissertation proposes a new reading and appraisal of an important theory of
distributive justice, Ronald Dworkin’s “Equality of Resources” (ER). ER is traditional in
holding that choices made by rational, ignorant and purely self-interested beings are
relevant to distributive justice. ER is novel both in its use of such choices and in
incorporating the (previously exclusively conservative) idea that one’s success is largely
one’s own responsibility into liberal egalitarianism.

I argue that the tax-and-redistribution scheme Dworkin proposes to make actual
distributions just is flawed because he misconceives the role of choice. He errs in
thinking that the conditions for person X to receive compensation depend on the choices
of such beings, although he is right, I argue, insofar as the relevant choices include X’s
hypothetical choices. (Further, Dworkin’s critics err in thinking, that, according to him,
these conditions wholly depend on X’s actual choices.) Dworkin errs in that ER implies
that whether X meets these conditions can depend on X’s irrational choices, although he
is right that whether X meets these conditions can depend on some of X’s actual choices.
ER becomes flawed, I argue, when Dworkin derives a tax-and-redistribution scheme
designed to achieve distributive justice in reality from the auction he proposes for
making hypothetical distributions just.

I then consider whether ER withstands stock objections and how plausible it is relative
to rival Theories. Dworkin argues that ER, but not Rawls’ Theory, meets the following
condition for a Theory to be plausible: the distributions a Theory deems just must be
sensitive to choices. I argue that Dworkin’s argument is no longer plausible once we
realize to which choice sensitivity principle he is himself committed. However, I argue,
Seana Shiffrin’s objection to ER fails because she misunderstands the role of choice in
ER, although she is right insofar as there is a related, though superficial, objection. I also
argue that ER is inconsistent and show how to resolve this inconsistency without leaving
ER vulnerable to attack by G.A. Cohen’s rival Theory. I trace ER’s inconsistency and the
failure of Dworkin’s argument against Rawls’ Theory to Dworkin’s method of
justification.