

SERIES: Bottlenecks: A New Theory of Equal Opportunity | Number 1 of 10

Joseph Fishkin | April 28, 2014 10:19am

Bottlenecks: The Real Opportunity Challenge



Note: This opens a two-week series devoted to exploring what we can learn about social mobility from Joseph Fishkin's new book, Bottlenecks.

Equal opportunity: a near-universally beloved idea, among people of many political persuasions. To be sure, we don't all agree on its contours or implications. Those who favor affirmative action *and* those who oppose it point to equal opportunity as their lodestar of fairness. But we need to be clear:

Equal opportunity cannot actually be achieved.

Three Reasons Equal Opportunity Is Impossible

1. The Family. Parents are free to make decisions about how to raise their children. Not everyone has the same resources—and even if resources were much closer to equal, not everyone has the same approach to parenting. So opportunities are going to be deeply

unequal from day one.

2. Merit is always, in part, past advantage. Sometimes the idea of equal opportunity is focused on what happens later in life, aiming for meritocracy in the allocation of, say, coveted college places or jobs. But “merit” is elusive. There’s no way to disentangle our true, underlying merit from the accumulated results of our past interactions with opportunities and advantages.

3. We’re all different. We have different goals. The same opportunities that are valuable to me may seem pointless to you. Moreover, because we’re different, I may *need* different opportunities to develop and grow than you need. Suppose I need glasses to see the blackboard, or an aide to enable me to participate in the class. When exactly are opportunities “equal”?

Bottlenecks in the Opportunity Structure

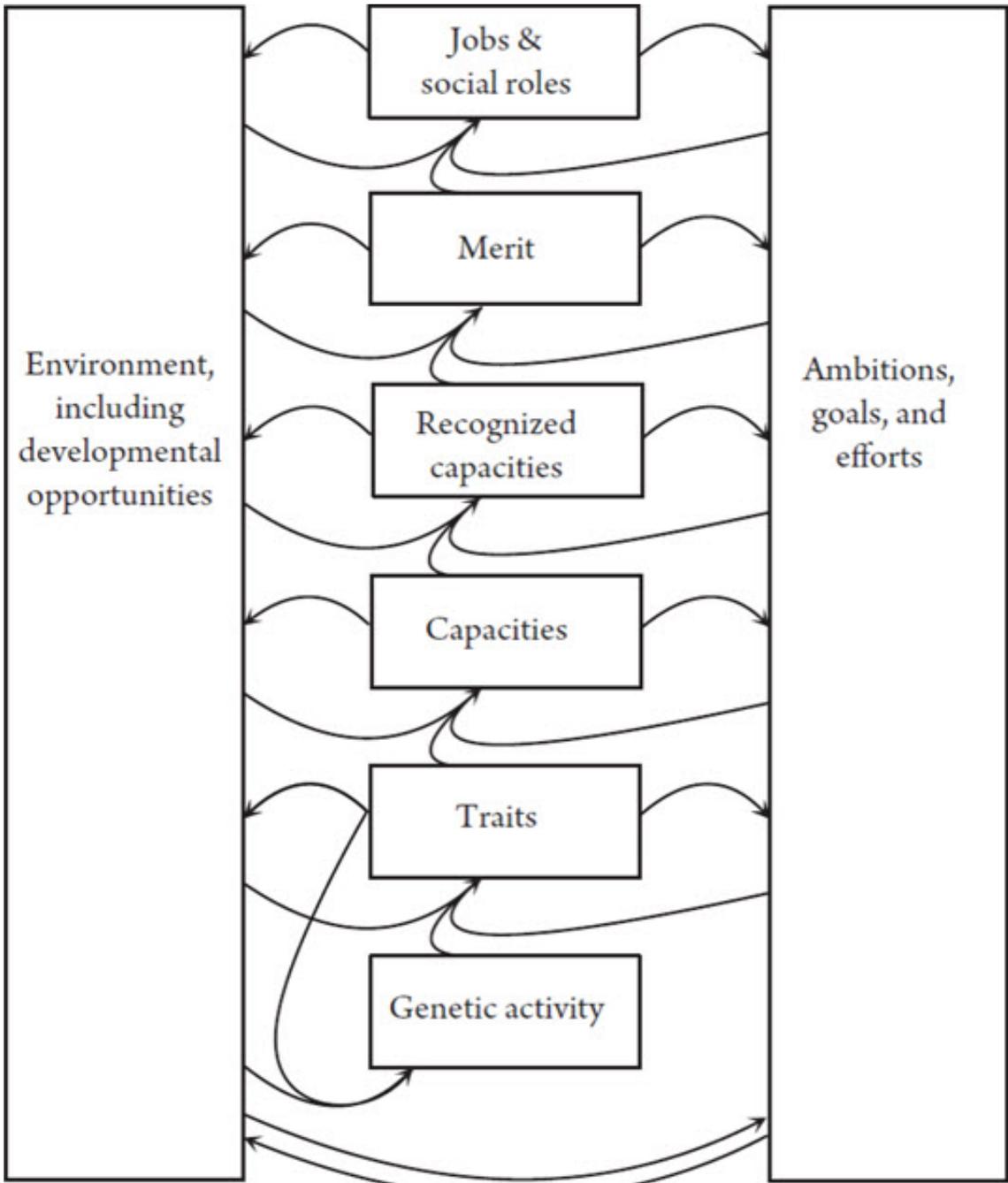
The fact that equal opportunity is impossible does not mean we should pack up and go home. First we need to identify the key *bottlenecks* influencing life chances. These are narrow places through which people must pass if they hope to reach a wide range of opportunities that fan out on the other side. College education; developmental opportunities in early childhood; enough money to navigate a society where almost everything requires money—all these are examples of potential bottlenecks (which will be addressed in later posts in this series).

While we can’t make opportunities equal, what we can usefully do is help more people *through* and *around* the bottlenecks that constrain the paths they can pursue in life.

Ultimately, this can help fix problems that even equalizing opportunity cannot. Imagine a completely fair test that forever determines, at age eighteen, who will have all the most desirable jobs and roles in a society. Opportunities are perfectly equal. But we might still ask, what about those who didn’t make the cut? Shouldn’t we have some on-ramps back on to the highways of opportunity for those who made an early exit?

The Trouble with Meritocracy

Some readers will still be attracted to an idea of a meritocratic race: equal opportunity after a “starting gate.” But there is no fair place to put the starting gate. Each outcome is another opportunity; development is a continuous, iterative process.



The Answer: Opportunity Pluralism

So what's the goal here? Our aim should be to make the opportunity structure more *pluralistic*. How? [That's tomorrow's post.](#)

Joseph Fishkin

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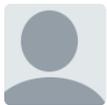
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Social Mobility Memos

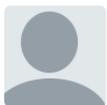
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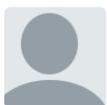
SolidBro • 12 days ago

Equality is a myth and always will be. People are different. They are genetically different and that is proven by twin studies where identical twins are separated and brought up in very different home backgrounds. When these identical twins are brought back together in their 40s, they are often working in the same type of jobs, marry they same type of spouses (amazingly similar), and even wear the same style of clothing and same car makes and models - despite having been separated at birth. The University of Minnesota has published some of the foundational twin studies.

I will never be able to dunk a basketball like LeBron James and he will never be able to do theoretical physics like an Einstein or Feynman. Some people are gifted with music and others with art, athletics, IQ, curiosity, humor, natural leadership, risk-taking, risk-aversion, or any of thousands of other traits.

Quit this fetish of equality! How boring the world would be if we were all homogenized and uniform.

6  |  • Reply • Share ›



KhadijahMuhammad • 13 days ago

Because EO is unattainable (granted) is not a reason to strive towards it.

3  |  • Reply • Share ›



Gregson14  KhadijahMuhammad • 13 days ago

And in striving for itl in nuffing the faceless bureaucrats the scheming

And in striving for it... in putting the useless bureaucrats, the meddling regulators and the spineless politicians in charge of developing policy just what do you accomplish?... You end up with a form of oppression directed at some members of society in an effort to bestow opportunity to those who would not otherwise have achieved it.

Every other species on this planet lives, survives and exists by the grace of Natural Law!... Is it such an affront to Progressive sensibilities that we can never be reminded of Thomas Hobbes' enduring observation that: "... life is rather brutish and short!"

Mankind in his supreme omnipotence endeavours to mitigate the cause and effect of every random element in our universe in a vain and arrogant attempt to transcend Natural Law. We seem to be convinced that we can change our weather, our climate and ultimately the minutiae that dominates our very existence, to the point that our subjective angst is reflected in the socio-economic and political fabrics of our societies.

One has to ask: in our constant judgement of all things, are we attempting to elevate ourself beyond the divine as the final arbiter of the Human Condition?...

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Khadijah Muhammad → Gregson14 • 12 days ago

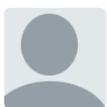
"You end up with a form of oppression directed at some members of society in an effort to bestow opportunity to those who would not otherwise have achieved it."

Possibly. When you're making sausage, the intermediate steps aren't pretty.

"One has to ask: in our constant judgement of all things, are we attempting to elevate ourself beyond the divine as the final arbiter of the Human Condition?..."

I think that question was answered in Genesis 3.

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Anon • 3 days ago

The main "bottleneck" is the collapse of two-parent family and breakdown of the transfer of accumulated human capital from parent to child, which is why so many public schools are irreparably broken (and unsafe). That is largely govt-induced failure resulting

from our welfare system. I'm sure the prescription will be more govt to fix this govt failure. What we do NOT need is more bleeding heart refusal to allow educational institutions and the market to cut bait and allocate talent, education, energy, and effort to its best use.

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kdhunter1 • 3 days ago

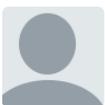
You could say democracy is just as much a myth as "equality," or, very least, based on the same realities that make true equality impossible. But, does that mean we should give up on democracy or striving for equality? Of course not. Moreover, equity is a better, more attainable goal than equality.

It's also important to keep historical perspective, to realize nothing is perfect and the best things are things for which we strive but may not achieve, i.e.: a reduction in armed conflict versus the arguably better elimination of war.

The society we have now is troubled and greatly flawed. But it's a better, more equal place than it was even 50 years ago. We have attained levels of equality that ancient people probably didn't think was possible for humans. But again, equity which can be a part of that, is better and more functional than equality.

As for the fear of government, faceless bureaucratic enforcement argument, you bring up issues that go both beyond equality and that are more rooted in current partisan political arguments and fears. It cuts both ways. White supremacists who then sat on the Supreme Court gave us the Dread Scott decision and Plessy v Ferguson. Both of which were reversed by the Supreme Court much later. Does that mean we eliminate the Supreme Court? I think not.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Leonard • 6 days ago

Equal opportunity is a highly motivating goal even if impossible to achieve. If you make people start believing that equal opportunity is impossible or undesirable, then expect destructive behavior and moral degradation in society. An attitude of seeking for equal opportunity encourages empathy, resource redistribution, restraint in exploitation of natural resources and general struggle for peaceful co-existence. Some people can become careless and use their knowledge destructively if they did not believe in equal opportunity. Business people and politicians already have this habits. If they could be joined by the religious groups, academicians and farmers, then only chaotic behavior would result.

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Robert Humphreys • 7 days ago

The question is not so much a lack of equality, so much as it is of growing inequality, widening disparities between income groups, and - above all - a sense that upward mobility, one of the main ideological supports of the system thus far, is less likely now for too many people.

I am inclined to believe that a certain amount of inequality is necessary given the dynamics of a free market system. Too much inequality -- coupled with downward mobility of sections of the middle class, and intergenerational poverty -- erodes demand necessary for growth and leads to real social disaffection.

One of the founders of Natural Law theory, Thomas Aquinas, understood the importance of community cohesion. Or perhaps by Natural Law, you are implying a sort of social Darwinism?

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WHAT'S THIS?

Bottleneck 1: Early Years Development

1 comment • 6 days ago



Ronald Mexico — I'm curious to know what benchmarks were used to measure adequate early year ...

Widening the Opportunity Bottlenecks in the Early Years: ...

1 comment • 5 days ago



HUGO FRANCISCO CAYCEDO GODOY — Big part of the problem: Parents stability



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