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Would Perfect Mobility be Perfect?

Adam Swift

This paper explores the key normative issues raised by empirical research into social mobility and meritocracy. Typically, sociologists working in this area are motivated by a concern with matters of social justice and equality of opportunity, but that concern tends to be rather vague and diffuse, which makes it difficult to assess the normative relevance of their findings. Surveying, in an accessible manner, five issues familiar to political philosophers that clarify the significance of sociologists' results, this paper explains why a regime of 'perfect mobility' is not an appropriate benchmark for evaluating the extent to which a society offers its members social justice or equality of opportunity. Some of the mechanisms that produce an association between the social position of parents and children are unobjectionable and would exist even in an altogether just society. Sociologists do not endorse perfect mobility. But neither are they clear about the variety, and normative significance, of the various mechanisms that tend to generate inequalities in mobility chances.

This paper explores some of the normative issues raised by empirical research into social mobility and meritocracy. Sociologists working in this area regard what they do as relevant to matters of social justice in general, and of equality of opportunity in particular. They often acknowledge that their research is motivated, at least in part, by a normative interest in such matters. But that interest tends to be rather vague and diffuse. Masters of precision when it comes to measuring and analysing the empirical phenomena they study, they are, typically, less sure in their analytical control of concepts such as 'equality of opportunity' or 'life-chance'. Moreover, they are sometimes suspicious of attempts by others to treat normative issues with similar seriousness, holding – less or more consciously – that such issues are not amenable to intellectually respectable investigation. Rejecting that view, this paper continues my attempt to build bridges between the technically complex, sophisticated, and rigorous work done by social scientists on the one hand, and the technically complex, sophisticated, and rigorous work done by political philosophers on the other (Marshall et al., 1997; Swift and Marshall, 1997; Swift, 2000).

Of course, social justice and equality of opportunity are not the only things that mobility researchers are interested in. One can quite coherently study the determinants of individuals' well-being, or unpack the mechanisms that generate an association between the levels of advantage enjoyed (or suffered) by parents and children, without regarding one's work as having any normative significance. Conceptualizations of stratification may be informed as much by an explanatory as a normative interest. These two goals can come apart, and it could very well be the case that the intellectual tools best suited to understanding class formation and action, or to elucidating the processes generating patterns of social mobility conceived as movement up or down a continuous hierarchy, are not also those most appropriate for investigation of the extent to which societies offer their members social justice. Nonetheless, it remains the case that those working on social mobility are typically motivated by some kind of interest in the value of equality of opportunity, formulating their positions in terms that have moral resonance and taking their findings to be relevant to the assessment of

public policy. So it matters that we have a clear understanding of what their research does and does not show.

The conception of a society in which people's destinations are quite independent of their origins often acts as an implicit benchmark in such research. Whether the association between origin and destination is measured by conditional probabilities or odds ratios between social categories, or by correlations between positions forming a continuum in stratification space, it is widely held that low associations indicate greater 'openness' or 'fairness', more 'equality of opportunity' or 'social justice'. This way of thinking can seem to suggest that, in an altogether just society, origins and destinations would be entirely unrelated. The normative ideal is a society in which where a person ends up is random with respect to where she starts out. On this view, 'perfect mobility' would be perfect.

Of course, no sociologist has been foolish enough to endorse such an extreme view. It is, typically, the *extent* of the statistical association between origins and destinations, not the mere fact that there is one, which is taken as evidence of injustice or of inequality of opportunity (e.g. Goldthorpe et al., 1980: 252). The point of this paper is not to construct and knock down a straw man. Nor is it to deny that mobility research has given us strong *prima facie* evidence of real injustice in the distribution of opportunities as between those with different social origins (or at least as between some of them). Its aim, rather, is to identify and elucidate, with the aid of techniques and arguments familiar to political philosophers, some of the reasons why complete statistical independence is an implausible ideal – reasons which sociologists recognize, but recognize only in a somewhat hazy way. It begins by running through five key issues that mobility researchers might want to keep clearly in mind when thinking about the normative implications of their research. It ends by drawing some of these together in order to explain precisely why perfect mobility would not be perfect.

Issue 1: Why Care About Unequal Chances of Mobility Between Positions Rather Than the Extent to Which Those Positions Are Unequal?

I have discussed elsewhere (Swift, 2000) some of the limitations, from a normative perspective, of the influential 'class analysis' approach to social mobility developed by

Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992). Some of the classes in their schema are said to be hierarchically ordered relative to one another, but others are not. (For discussion of the significance of non-vertical mobility for social justice, see Marshall et al., 1997: 219–221.) And even where they are so ordered, it remains the case that the class categories are only indirect and ordinal measures of that which, because it is distributed unequally between them, allows us to say that occupants of those class positions are *unequal* with respect to anything, rather than just different. This means that we need to be very careful when taking class mobility rates as evidence relevant to claims about equality of opportunity. Mobility rates between classes – as measured by odds ratios – tell us solely and specifically about the distribution of chances, as between those of different class origins, of achieving and avoiding particular class destinations. They tell us nothing about the distribution of opportunities in any more general sense.

To see why, it may help to invoke a pedantic formula that can help to clarify our thinking about the distribution of opportunities:

x is unequal to *y* with respect to the opportunity to get (or to become) *z*

The purpose of the formula is to focus attention on the specificity of the claim in question. (See Roemer, 2000 for an alternative way of urging the importance of careful specification.) Two societies – or the same society at different times – can manifest identical patterns of mobility *between class positions*, yet distribute other kinds of opportunity in very different ways.

Consider the wholly hypothetical case in Figure 1. For all we know, the odds ratios measuring class mobility could be exactly the same in 2000 as in 1900. But it would be wrong to infer that there had been no change in inequality of opportunity. Comparing those from different class origins, all of the following statements are true:

1. Everybody is better off.
2. There are more chances for upward mobility.
3. The gap between the positions that those of different origins tend to end up in is smaller.
4. The distribution of opportunities to achieve an absolute level of goods (e.g. level 4) is more equal.
5. The distribution of opportunities to achieve a level 2/3 that of the best-off class is more equal.
6. The distribution of opportunities to buy goods is more equal.

This last point depends on observing that the rungs of the ladder, movement between which counts as mobility,

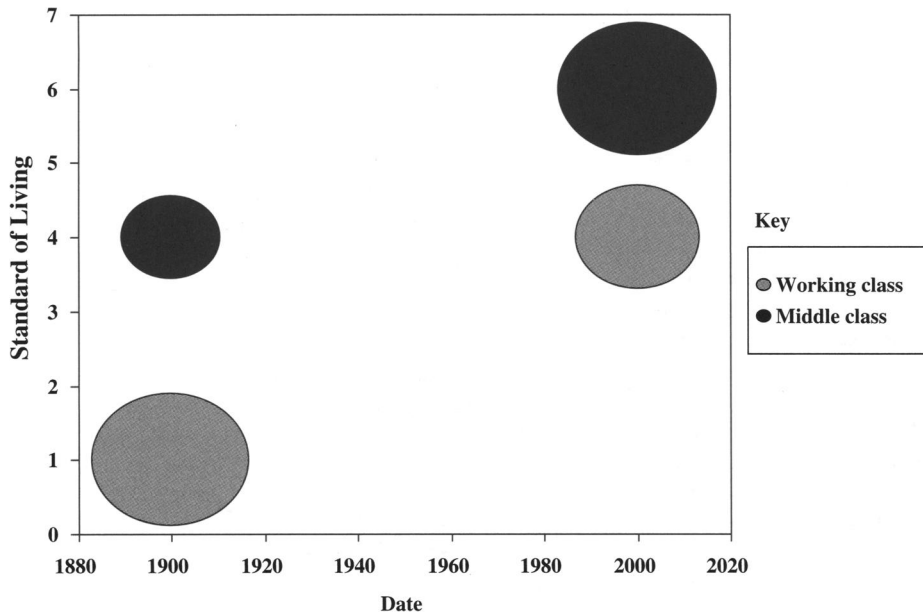


Figure 1 Class sizes and standards of living: hypothetical changes

are themselves constituted by bundles of opportunities (such as opportunities to buy goods). Even if there were no mobility at all between the two classes, still it would be true that the opportunity to buy goods was more evenly distributed, as between those born into different class origins, in 2000 than in 1900. The class structure may be no more ‘open’ than it was. ‘Social fluidity’ may be constant. But the opportunity to do some of the things that matter to people – the resources available to them – are more equally distributed as between children of different class origins.

Though this presents the critique as specifically directed against a ‘class analysis’ approach to mobility, it should be clear that the issue raised applies more widely. However we conceive the positions between which individuals move, those positions are going to have associated with them, perhaps be constituted by, bundles of opportunities. Some of those will be mobility opportunities – opportunities for movement to other positions – but many of them will not. If mobility theorists are interested in the distribution of opportunities as between those born into different social origins, they need to recognise that positions are characterized by differing amounts and kinds of opportunity. Some of those opportunities are not opportunities to move between positions but opportunities to do other things. Any overall index of the extent

to which a society offers its members equality of opportunity should take all kinds of opportunity into account. Opportunities for movement between positions could be getting more equal while the opportunities constituting those positions are getting less so (or the converse). (For a similar distinction developed by economists see van de Gaer et al., 2001. For an innovative attempt to operationalise the kind of index suggested here, using a novel ‘human capital’ approach to the measurement of social position, see Gershuny, 2002a, 2002b.)

Social justice is not simply about securing equal chances of access to unequally rewarded positions. Fair access is an important part of that story, but it is not all of it. It matters also that the inequalities in rewards attached to those positions are themselves justified (Marshall et al., 1997: 15–17). Once we notice that the unequal rewards that characterize different positions can themselves be conceived as *opportunities* (such as opportunities to buy goods), it no longer makes sense to regard conventional mobility research as telling us all we need to know about the distribution of opportunities as between those born into different social origins. It may tell us about the distribution of opportunities for movement between positions, but it is silent on the distribution of all the other kinds of opportunity that matter.

Issue 2: Statistical Chances Versus Chances as Opportunities

But does conventional mobility research tell us even about the distribution of opportunities for movement between positions? To make claims about the distribution of those opportunities involves a speculative inference. The data used tell us not about the distribution of *opportunities* as between those of different origins, but about the distribution of *outcomes*. It is true that one cannot achieve an outcome without having had the opportunity to achieve that outcome. But the converse does not hold. One can perfectly well have the opportunity to achieve an outcome that one does not in fact achieve. Indeed, one can have the opportunity to ‘achieve’ an outcome that one makes no effort to attain and the attainment of which one would not even regard as an ‘achievement’. This means that, on their own, measures of association between where people start out and where they end up cannot even tell us about the distribution of opportunities for mobility.

There is a crucial ambiguity in the term ‘chances’. Sociologists claim that their research tells us about the distribution of mobility chances. This is correct if we understand ‘chances’ as ‘statistical probabilities’. For example, it is true that, statistically speaking, the chance of a working-class child ending up in a service-class job is less than that of a service-class child. But that fact, on its own, tells us nothing about whether two such children had the same chance of ending up in such a job, about whether they both had the opportunity to do so. Here, of course, a ‘chance’ is something that a person might or might not take, or perhaps be able to take – because they don’t want it or, perhaps, because they don’t have the ability to take it.

From a normative perspective, what matters are chances as opportunities, not chances as statistical probabilities. What we care about is not whether people from different origins have the same statistical chance of ending up in particular destinations, but whether they have the same opportunity to do so. It is the *opportunity set* that counts. But mobility research tells us nothing about that. So sociologists should be more cautious than they typically are when they claim that their research has uncovered inequalities of opportunity. They may have uncovered inequalities in the statistical chances of those with different origins coming to occupy different destinations. But they trade on implicit assumptions when they infer, and sometimes imply, that those inequalities are problematic from a normative perspective.

Sociologists have typically taken their findings as evidence of a variety of obstacles to class mobility – from overt discrimination to inequality in access to education and other resources. But conventional mobility data are equally consistent with the hypothesis that those of different origins differ solely in their preferences – whether for destinations, or the education needed to achieve them, or both. Unless we assume that all members of society are equally motivated to seek upward mobility – with what counts as ‘up’ being given by the sociologist – and that they are equally motivated to seek the means necessary for upward mobility, we cannot tell whether there is any normatively troubling inequality of opportunity, as opposed to an unequal distribution of (i.e. simply different) preferences. (On education specifically, see Murphy, 1990.)

Issue 3: Explaining Preferences

Suppose we did the kind of research needed to discover whether inequalities in statistical chances of mobility were indeed due either to differences in preferences for different destinations, or to differences in preferences for the kinds of education needed to achieve them. Suppose it turned out that they were. Society is full of children who want the same kind of job as their parents or who, though wanting what they regard as a ‘better’ job, prefer not to do the schoolwork that would help them get it. Having read the previous section, we might infer from this that there was no inequality of opportunity – merely different people making different choices from the same opportunity set. We can, after all, explain the differential destinations ‘achieved’ by those from different origins without invoking any obstacles to mobility.

But this would be too quick. Most obviously, the mere fact that people chose their destinations, and got the destinations they chose, would not be enough to show that they had the same opportunity set. It matters, for that, whether they could have achieved the same outcomes if they had wanted to. Consider a son of working-class parents who never aspires to anything other than a working-class job. In fact, he would be happy to get such a job because that way he would avoid downward mobility into the underclass (Goldthorpe, 2000: 161–181) and, because of economic growth, could reasonably expect to have a better life than his parents had. This explains why he ends up in a working-class job. But it does nothing to show that he had any chance of ending up anywhere else. The same goes for a daughter who does want to climb the social ladder but does not want to work to pass

exams at school. Perhaps she would not have passed those exams, or at least not achieved the grades requisite for social ascent, even if she had tried. In that case she did not really have a chance to climb the ladder, even though she never came up against the obstacle that would have prevented her.

Suppose we find that the distribution of outcomes corresponds exactly to the distribution of choices for those outcomes. Children of parents in positions that sociologists characterize as relatively advantaged (e.g. 'service class') tend to choose to pursue such positions themselves. Children of parents in positions that sociologists characterize as less advantaged (e.g. 'working class') tend to choose those. It matters normatively, and for a proper understanding of the causal mechanisms in operation, where those choices come from. To see why, contrast the following two cases:

In case A, the reason why the two kinds of children make different choices is because they both want to follow in their parents' footsteps. As it happens, the playing-field is level, so that they both face the same opportunity sets, and all know this to be the case. Both sets of children are fully informed about the rewards attaching to a wide range of jobs, about their probabilities of achieving them, about the risks they run in pursuing any particular strategy. It just happens that their desire to do the kind of job their parents do is their dominant goal. Under one description, they share the same preferences – to do what their parents do. Under another, their preferences are very different – one set wants to be salaried managers or professionals, the other to do manual work for a weekly wage.

In case B, the reasons why the two sets of children make different choices are quite different from those in case A. They have different resources at their disposal, and they are competing on a playing-field tilted in favour of some and against others, so the chances of their achieving different jobs – and the costs of trying but failing to do so – are unequal. Moreover, because of biases and distortions in the way information is available to the two groups, less advantaged children underestimate their chances of climbing the ladder, perceiving the playing-field to be even less level than it actually is. On top of this, let us suppose, there is also some adaptive preference formation. Their preferences for different kinds of jobs adapt to the perceived probability of their getting them and the costs and benefits judged likely to result from strategies devoted to their pursuit.

In case A, it is hard to see that there need be anything normatively problematic about the inequality in chances of ending up in different kinds of jobs. The pattern of outcomes does not manifest or result from any injustice

or unfairness. In case B, however, the mere fact that the children have chosen to pursue strategies that lead to their pursuing jobs similar to those of their parents hardly means that their society is above normative criticism. To the extent that we understand the choices people make as endogenous to distributions that are themselves unjust (or perhaps simply unequal), the fact that people are getting what they choose cannot be the end of the story.

How we decide when choices, and especially preferences, are adaptive is, of course, a difficult question and one central to the normative evaluation of many kinds of empirical inequality. Progress in answering it would be of interest to those troubled by gender inequality no less than to class analysts (Nussbaum, 2001). I do not have any answers, but a few distinctions may help to clarify what is at stake.

First, it matters whether the empirical factors and probabilities to which choices may adapt are *accurate* or not. A society in which less advantaged children accurately perceive that social ascent would be an uphill struggle is surely worse than one in which they mistakenly believe it to be so – though of course it matters why they have the mistaken perception, whether anybody is responsible for that fact, and so on. And the policy implications are different. To the extent that misperception is the problem, the solution is better information. If they really are struggling against the odds, other measures are needed. (For a discussion which excellently brings out the complexity of educational choices, see Gambetta, 1987: 71ff and conclusion.)

Second, it matters whether the causal conditions to which choices adapt are themselves *unjust* or merely *unequal*. Choices that are normatively troubling, because inequality-producing, can be endogenous to inequalities in the distribution of resources that are not themselves unjust. Suppose it is fair when, facing the same opportunity set, some parents choose to work hard and earn money while others choose not to. The resulting inequality between parents may well be just. But the mere fact of that inequality – however just in itself – could make different strategies rational for their children. This is simply a special case of the familiar problem faced by those who would seek to insulate equality of opportunity from justified inequalities of outcome.

Third, in so far as different educational or occupational choices result from different preferences, it matters why children differ in their preferences. We should be clear that, in case B, it is primarily choices that are adaptive, not preferences. As that case was described, there was also an element of adaptive preference formation or sour grapes. Less advantaged children, who would have

wanted to pursue more ambitious careers but decide not to try, come to believe that they do not want those careers anyway. But it is differences in perceived probabilities, and assessments of costs and benefits, not differences in preferences, that do most to explain the two groups' different choices. In case A, by contrast, it is precisely preferences that differ. Indeed, the fact that the case is merely one of 'different preferences' is what grounds the suggestion that the resulting outcomes are normatively unproblematic. The thought is that all children face the same opportunity set and simply choose different options within it.

But of course it is relevant *why* children's preferences tend to reflect their parents' occupation. The case stipulates that they have good information about a wide range of occupations, so we cannot accuse their parents of distorting the formation of their preferences by withholding information. Presumably the tendency results from the differential effects of intra-familial interaction, differential exposure to particular kinds of stimuli such as friends of the family, and so on. But, in that case, it may be thought unfair that some children get to meet and be inspired by high-achieving professionals while others, though having accurate information, never benefit from that kind of immediate, ambition-enhancing and preference-affecting interaction. Parents may be doing nothing wrong when they or their friends act as role models for their children. Nonetheless, some may find morally problematic the distributive outcomes that such processes of preference-formation tend to produce.

Issue 4: Equality of Opportunity and Luck Egalitarianism

A fourth issue concerns the way in which the ideal of equality of opportunity is understood, and has implications for the reasons we might have to value meritocracy. Both concepts – 'equality of opportunity' and 'meritocracy' – are widely invoked by sociologists. Their core thought is that a society in which people's opportunities for social ascent or descent are equal (i.e. based on merit alone) is better than one in which irrelevant characteristics – such as their race, gender or class of origin – influence their chances. This perspective is, however, called into question by some political philosophers, who have developed a more radical conception of equality of opportunity. Engagement with that alternative conception may make a difference to the way in which sociologists think about the value of meritocracy.

This more radical approach – luck egalitarianism – holds that inequalities are unjust to the extent that they result from factors beyond people's control, factors for which individuals cannot be held responsible. From this perspective, it is indeed unfair if the social position of her parents makes a difference to someone's chances in life. But it is no less unfair if that difference is made by her natural ability. Both are 'morally arbitrary' external influences that cannot justify inequalities either in outcomes or in the opportunities to achieve unequal outcomes. Luck egalitarians would seek to level the playing-field not only between rich and poor children but also between those lucky and unlucky enough to possess, or not to possess, productive capacities (Cohen, 1989; Dworkin, 2000).

Suppose we define as 'meritocratic' an allocation mechanism whereby people get better- or worse-rewarded jobs on the basis of their true ability, undistorted by ascribed characteristics such as race, gender or class. It is, for luck egalitarians, unclear why this should be regarded as an improvement, morally speaking, on an allocation mechanism in which people's social origins influence their rewards. Sociologists who care about social mobility tend to value equality of opportunity between children of the same level of ability born to parents occupying different positions in the stratification system. Poor children blessed with natural ability should have the same chances in life as rich children with the same good fortune. Rich children who lack ability should suffer downward mobility – and it is a problem that their parents are well-placed to protect them from sliding down the ladder. But the luck egalitarian wants to know why a clever poor child should end up better placed than a stupid rich one.

Notice that we can formulate this objection in terms of the pedantic formula proposed above. For example, it is conventional to care about equality of opportunity as between x and y , with x = 'children from working-class origins' and y = 'children from service-class origins'. Why not care about equality of opportunity between x = 'children lacking in natural ability' and y = 'children with lots of natural ability'? Notice also that it matters how we specify z – what it is that people should have equal opportunity to achieve. A luck egalitarian does not have to think that all people – adroit as well as clumsy – should have equal opportunity to become brain surgeons. She need only think that they should have equal opportunity to earn the same income (Roemer, 2000: 29–31).

For luck egalitarians – as for followers of Hayek – the idea that people *deserve* to be rewarded in accordance with their productivity cannot withstand scrutiny (Swift, 2001: 39–48). But there is a second reason why we might value greater meritocracy: it is more efficient when people

get jobs on merit than when allocation mechanisms are distorted by class factors. Meritocracy now is a means to the end of economic productivity (Sen, 2000). But luck egalitarians will be very interested in the distribution of that product. For example, they may value meritocratic equality of opportunity only in so far as it tends to further, perhaps maximally to further, the well-being of those who, through no fault of their own, are the least advantaged members of society. At this point, of course, incentive considerations enter the story. For luck egalitarians, the ideal would be for people to do the jobs they are best able to do without anybody receiving a return to luck. We would separate the allocative and the distributive functions of the market. The reason usually given for why we cannot do this is that the more productive are not willing to use their abilities optimally without receiving greater-than-average rewards (Cohen, 1995).

It is conventional to argue that greater equality of condition is necessary if societies are to move towards more equal mobility chances as between those born into different classes of origin. This is because of the difficulty in insulating children's equality of opportunity from parent's inequalities in outcome. One reason offered for why Sweden does exhibit greater social fluidity than the other societies with which it has been compared is precisely that Sweden has taken greater steps to reduce the gap between the various starting positions (Goldthorpe, 2000: 255–256). In so far as this is conceived as an argument for reducing the gap – in so far as the thought is that we should reduce inequality of condition *because* doing so promotes equality of opportunity – luck egalitarians will think that it gets things the wrong way round. Greater fluidity between class positions is valuable only instrumentally, because it is an efficient means of creating economic product and thereby, if we can get our distributive mechanisms right, of helping the unluckiest members of society. It may be that we should indeed reduce the gap in order to promote efficient mobility, but, perhaps paradoxically, the reason for doing so is, ultimately, that this is itself a means to improve the absolute position of those who are least advantaged because most unlucky.

Issue 5: The Family and Unequalizing Mechanisms

Of course, most people reject luck egalitarianism. Many think that it is unfair if people's prospects depend on their class background but that it is not unfair if those prospects depend – in part – on their natural ability,

even where it is accepted that both are a matter of luck (for relevant empirical evidence see Marshall et al., 1999). There are of course interesting further issues here. How should we deal with effort? Isn't it the case that a person's productive capacities depend both on what they are born with and how they choose to develop what they are born with? It is hard to tell exactly what can be concluded from empirical research into popular beliefs about justice. Even the most carefully worded questions on questionnaires leave crucial indeterminacies (Swift, 1999). Still, it seems likely that most people believe, or think they believe, that some differential reward is due to the exercise of attributes that people possess or fail to possess as a matter of brute luck (Miller, 1999: 61–93).

But, quite apart from this fundamental divide over what philosophers call constitutive luck – kinds of luck that constitute people as the individuals they are (Hurley, 2002) – it is natural to make further normative discriminations between the mechanisms that tend to produce unequal outcomes. Even those who disapprove of private education, or economic bequest and inheritance, do not typically also disapprove of bedtime stories or other kinds of familial interaction that tend to give some lucky children advantages over less fortunate others. Hard-liners may seek to neutralize or compensate the unequalizing effects of these various mechanisms by which relatively advantaged parents tend to have relatively advantaged children. It may be that, while it would be wrong to prevent parents from reading bedtime stories to their children, or engaging them in intellectually stimulating conversation at meal times, or introducing them to their high-achieving friends, we would be justified in doing what we can to prevent the children who receive such treatment from deriving unfair advantage over others who do not. One way to do this would be to organize things so that everybody got the same level of advantage, irrespective of how they had been treated by their parents. Another would be to accept unequally advantaged positions, but allocate people to them randomly. Of course, in anything but an egalitarian utopia (or dystopia), we must expect non-random inequalities of outcome. And in that case it matters hugely that some mechanisms by which parents convey advantage to children warrant greater respect, morally speaking, than others.

Clearly the family is of crucial importance. Political philosophers and social scientists have long known that the family is an obstacle to equality of opportunity (e.g. Rawls, 1971: 301ff; Fishkin, 1983). Sociologists have now started to unpack the mechanisms by which the family exerts its unequalizing effects – though they have not yet approached (and may never be able to approach)

the level of detail relevant to normative discussion. Could we ever, for example, separate out the effect of informal intra-familial interaction (like bedtime stories or mealtime conversations) and similar processes likely to be regarded as permissible by any political philosopher from other, more controversial mechanisms (such as informed school choice in a context where choice of school matters to children's chances of success)?

But it is not as if political philosophers know what to say about the family either (but see Valentine and Lipson, 1989, and Munoz-Darde, 1999, for some relevant arguments). There is, as yet, little serious work attempting to identify which transmission processes are justified, which objectionable, and which morally required. What we need, on the normative side, is a theory of the family that tells us what parents are and are not justified in doing for their children, and what kinds of intergenerational transmission within the family we, as citizens, would be justified in permitting and preventing. We need a theory that tells us why we would do well to abolish private schools but do badly to ban bedtime stories, and why this would remain true even if the difference between getting and not getting bedtime stories was more influential for a child's prospects than the difference between going to a private or a state school. There are big and difficult issues here, concerning the scope of legitimate – and perhaps required – parental partiality and how it meshes with any concern for equality of opportunity (Swift, forthcoming).

Would Perfect Mobility be Perfect?

It can be tempting to think that social justice would require that children from all social origins would have equal chances of achieving and avoiding all destinations. This would be what sociologists call 'perfect mobility' – a mobility regime in which where you start off has no influence on where you end up. Though none endorses such a regime, they do tend unproblematically to assume that low associations between the positions occupied by parents and children are morally better than high ones. Let me begin to conclude by drawing together some of the strands of argument sketched out above, each of which, in a different way, explains why some inequality in statistical mobility chances should be expected even in the ideal society and clarifies the normative significance of the various mechanisms that might generate such inequality.

A. Asymmetry Between Downward and Upward Mobility

Influential rational choice models explaining differential educational outcomes between those of different origins posit that people are more concerned to avoid downward mobility than they are to achieve upward mobility (Goldthorpe, 2000: 161–205). Suppose that people do indeed regard downward movement not merely as bad but as worse than upward movement would be good. Every time a service-class child skidded and her place in the top flight was taken by a working-class child, there would be net loss of welfare. In that case, and other things equal, the way to maximize social welfare would be to have no mobility. Everybody should stay on the same rung of the ladder as that occupied by their parents (Harding et al., forthcoming: 23–25).

The point discussed as Issue 1 strengthens this observation. Suppose that people's reference groups are such that what they care about is being better off than their parents. Though noticing that others are even better off than they are, they are not too bothered about that fact. What matters – to them – is that they are going to be better off as adults than their parents, better off than they were when they themselves were children. Upward mobility is not needed for them to achieve that goal. Economic growth will do it for them. Immobility in class terms, or in terms of percentile in the distribution, or in terms of rung on the ladder, however that ladder is conceived, may not be immobility in terms of standard of living or quality of life. One can have more or better opportunities than one's parents without having *any* opportunity to move up in terms of social stratification. The ladder is really an escalator.

Normatively speaking, this consideration is far from compelling. Even if it were true that people's welfare functions worked this way, aggregate social welfare is not all that matters. Justice matters more. So if giving a working-class child a fair chance of reaching the top means worsening the service-class child's chance of staying there, we should not worry about that – even if the latter is more distressed than the former is pleased. It is of course consistent with this normative position that such welfare functions are crucial for understanding the choices people make, and the mobility patterns such choices generate.

B. Non-suspect Immobility-producing Preferences

Issue 3 concerned the possibility that people's choices, and perhaps also their preferences, may be endogenous,

causally explained by the inequality they tend to reproduce. However seriously we take that possibility, *some* tendency towards immobility would surely result from those about which there were no grounds for suspicion. Even if we assume that sociologists correctly rank occupations – or groups of occupations – in terms of the objective level of well-being typically enjoyed by those who occupy them, we still have to allow that some people may, non-adaptively, prefer ‘worse’ positions to ‘better’ ones. It is hard to believe that all the sons of farmers who go into farming do so only because they do not rate their chances of doing anything else. It is not necessarily irrational to prefer manual work, and the workplace culture that goes with it, to a job pushing bits of paper round an office. Some people may prefer to stay in the region where they grew up, close to family and friends, forsaking the higher ‘objective’ rewards that would accrue to them if they were willing to move. Familiar processes of acculturation and socialization will surely lead to some immobility at the level of occupations or types of occupations. Some children want to be like their parents and some parents want their children to be like them. It would be at least controversial to regard the contribution of such mechanisms to inequalities in mobility rates as indicating any failure of social justice. (One area where this has policy implications concerns the mobility of members of ethnic groups. If cultural or religious differences tend to produce inequalities in statistical mobility chances – because of different preferences for different kinds of work – it is clearly problematic to infer that there is anything morally objectionable going on.)

C. Legitimate Parental Partiality

As discussed as Issue 5, normative reflection on the family suggests that any society that permits unequal outcomes should also permit parents to do some things for or with their children likely to influence their children’s outcome position in the distribution of advantage. Suppose a society blocked all transmission mechanisms that blatantly offend against egalitarian principles and do not fall within the scope of legitimate parental partiality. Suppose this meant that there was no private education, no economic bequest or inheritance. Suppose the society tried hard to compensate unlucky children for their parents’ comparative inability to provide valuable investment. So there was free nursery education for all, considerable resources devoted to helping parents learn how to help their kids, and the like. Still, familial interactions of the kind that even egalitarians want to permit as legitimate would tend to produce unequal outcomes. And it is relatively advantaged parents

who will tend to transmit, through those interactions, attributes likely to make their children relatively advantaged – whether those attributes be intellectual curiosity, nice social skills, a sense of discipline, or the right stuff genetically speaking. (On the variety of mechanisms explaining the intergenerational persistence of inequality, and an attempt quantitatively to decompose that persistence into various components, see Bowles and Gintis, 2002.)

This is not a conceptual claim. We could, just about, imagine a world in which it was only badly-off parents who had valuable characteristics to impart. (For example, in terms of motivation, in the world as it is, some children of disadvantaged parents are particularly driven to succeed.) But, overall, the world we live in is not like that, and for obvious reasons. It is because they possess certain characteristics, and others do not, that some parents are better off than others. Those who possess such characteristics are particularly well placed to convey them – whether intentionally or unintentionally – to their children. This kind of legitimate parental partiality would better be regarded as part of social justice than as a constraint on its realization. A society that denied its members the freedom to stimulate their children through engaging them in conversation at the table would be unjust, even if it had greater equality of opportunity as between those born to parents with different levels of cultural capital.

D. Incentive Considerations

Any non-utopian theory will have to take incentive effects into account. Suppose that nothing deeply moral to do with individual freedom or human rights or legitimate parental partiality should prevent us from banning the bequest and inheritance of property. There is no justice consideration that requires us to permit *that* kind of transmission. It by no means follows that we should institute a 100% inheritance tax. If parents were prevented from bequeathing resources to their children, they would lose a powerful incentive to produce. If we care about productivity – even if only because we want to use the product to maximize the advantage of the worst off – then we have reason to permit some intergenerational transmission, despite its unequalizing impact and even if we regard that transmission as fundamentally unjust. This is still a normative consideration. We have moral reason to permit it – that reason is the moral urgency of helping the worst off. Not permitting it will worsen their position. But this is the kind of moral reason we act on when we decide to pay the kidnapper’s ransom. It may be the morally right thing to do but it is not morally justified all the way down (Cohen, 1995; Sen, 2000).

Where exactly to draw the line between C-type and D-type reasons to permit intergenerational transmission is a difficult issue. One person's legitimate partiality will be another's selfish demanding of an incentive. That does not mean, as social scientists tend to assume, that the answer is purely subjective, with no right answer in principle being available. It means just what it says: people disagree. (See Swift, 1999, for more discussion of social scientists' misplaced mistrust of political philosophy.) But the conceptual distinction should be clear enough. C says that parents are acting quite properly – and we would be acting wrongly if we prevented them – when they engage in certain kind of advantage-transmitting activity. D says that, even when they are not acting properly, and we would be justified in preventing them if we could do so without inducing negative consequences, those consequences give us moral reason to let them go ahead. Society would be better, morally speaking, if people did not demand incentive payments. But it would be worse, again morally speaking, if we did not pay them the incentives they demand.

Conclusion

No sociologist thinks that social justice requires perfect mobility. All are aware that such a view would be crude and simplistic. On the one hand, equality of opportunity does not seem to demand the complete absence of any association between origins and destinations. It requires that only on the implausible assumption that ability and motivation of the kind that many think properly determine people's destinations are randomly distributed as between those born into different origins. On the other hand, equality of opportunity is not the only component of social justice. There is a tension between equality of opportunity on the one hand, and respect for the family on the other, which few would resolve simply by abolishing the latter. While there are families, and those families are differently located in the distribution of advantage, children born to different parents are indeed likely to enjoy or suffer unequal prospects. So equality of opportunity does not require perfect mobility, and social justice does not require complete equality of opportunity.

Few sociologists, however, have moved beyond these rather general observations to explore in greater detail the normative significance of the various mechanisms that do, in fact, combine to produce the mobility regimes their empirical research describes. In a sense, of course, that is not their task, and this paper is not primarily intended as a critique of existing sociological practice.

Sometimes, to be sure, sociologists report their findings in ways likely to mislead – for example, when they infer conclusions about 'inequality of opportunity' *per se*, when their evidence supports only claims about the distribution of statistical chances to achieve and avoid destinations conceived in particular, and sometimes rather limited, ways. So it is true that one aim of this paper is to encourage an equivalent precision in the formulation of claims about normatively loaded ideas as is currently achieved in the specification of their statistical models. Its main purpose, however, is more constructive – to clarify and make available to sociologists, in accessible form, some of the ideas that often, albeit implicitly, inform their thinking about the significance of their research.

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