

---

Uneven Starts and Just Deserts

Author(s): Bruce N. Waller

Source: *Analysis*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), pp. 209-213

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of The Analysis Committee

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3328562>

Accessed: 06-01-2019 00:58 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*The Analysis Committee, Oxford University Press* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Analysis*

This complication need not be a general one in Parfit's world. He points out that one can promise to help someone 'and all their future selves', and such a clause could easily be included in the marriage promise. But he is equally clear in showing that there is no way of getting around a change of the *promisor's* self by changing the wording or conditions attaching to promises. Any promise is made by a particular self and as a matter of principle that self cannot bind others by its promise, no matter how the promise is worded.

This confirms the allegation that Parfit's world is a much more difficult one to live in than he acknowledges, and that the picture presented by his description of the Nineteenth Century Russian example is a misleading one. Any long-term promise is something one can no longer sincerely make once one is in Parfit's world, and commitments become extremely complex, as we have seen. Of course, one can avoid some of this (as Parfit does in the case of the Russians) by ignoring certain of the implications of the change to a reductionist view of persons and their identity. But then one ends up with a different concept of promising: one according to which, for instance, one can bind others by one's own promise.

*University of Natal,  
P.O. Box 375,  
Pietermaritzburg 3200, South Africa*

## UNEVEN STARTS AND JUST DESERTS

By BRUCE N. WALLER

**I**N life's race, the different results people achieve are due to "uneven starts". Since people start unequally — at starting points not of their own choosing or making — they are not morally responsible (do not justly deserve blame or credit) for the finish. This uneven starts position is stated elegantly by John Rawls:

It seems to be one of the fixed points of our considered judgments that no one deserves his place in the distribution of native endowments, any more than one deserves one's initial starting place in society. The assertion that a man deserves the superior character that enables him to make the effort to cultivate his abilities is equally problematic; for his character depends in large part upon fortunate family and social circumstances for which he can claim no credit. ([2], p. 104)

Rawls's claim that uneven starts undermine just deserts has recently been attacked on two fronts. Daniel Dennett [1] and George Sher [3] offer distinct but similar defences of just deserts, and each develops a spirited challenge to the uneven starts claims.

For both Dennett and Sher, the crucial point is that even if starting points are not precisely even, still in at least some cases what we do — what we accomplish — really does depend on our own efforts. While not every accomplishment is open to everyone (I could never be a jockey) there are still avenues of success open to most (if not quite all) of us, and it is up to us what we do with those open possibilities. Thus — according to Dennett and Sher — we can justly claim to deserve the fruits of our success (and perhaps also the bitter fruits of our failures). There *are* differences in starting points, but those differences do not eliminate moral responsibility.

Dennett challenges the uneven start basis for denying moral responsibility thus:

... one may be tempted to say, there are two sorts of differences in an agent's circumstances that are merely matters of luck: how much initial strength or talent or character one is lucky enough to be born with, and how many lucky breaks one encounters during one's period of self-creation. One way or the other, it seems, these factors must conspire to defeat any self-styled agent's claim of personal responsibility for his own character. . . .

Suppose — what certainly seems to be true — that people are born with noticeably different cognitive endowments and propensities to develop character traits. . . . Is this 'hideously unfair' . . . or is this bound to lead to something hideously unfair? Not necessarily.

Dennett then offers an insidiously charming example to show why such differences in starting points and subsequent lucky breaks do not vitiate just deserts and moral responsibility:

Imagine a footrace in which the starting line was staggered: those with birthdays in January start a yard ahead of those born in February, and eleven yards ahead of those born in December. Surely no one can help being born in one month rather than another. Isn't this markedly unfair? Yes, if the race is a hundred yard dash. No, if it's a marathon. In a marathon such a relatively small initial advantage would count for nothing, since one can reliably expect other fortuitous breaks to have even greater effects. . . . Is it fair enough not to be worth worrying about? Of course. After all, luck averages out in the long run. ([1], p. 95)

It seems churlish to poke at Dennett's delightful example; but in truth the effects of small initial differences on long range character development are not at all analogous to staggered starting positions in a marathon. Initial differences in life's race are more often amplified than cancelled out. The initially more alert individual engages in exploratory activities that are reinforced, and thus becomes increasingly inquisitive; the eager student is positively reinforcing for her teacher and receives extra attention; the lad who steals a few coins is a suspect when other coins are lost; the better player sharpens skills and develops stamina in competition, while her less talented teammate's skills and stamina and confidence gradually erode on the bench. The small gap widens. Not

always, of course; I am not claiming a slippery slope down which the initially disadvantaged inexorably slide. Subsequent influences — later “racing luck” — sometimes overbalance initial disadvantages. But small initial differences should not be lightly dismissed as making little or no difference in the essentially ‘fair and equal’ marathon race of life. Rather than Dennett’s equal-luck marathon, a better analogy might be a horse race on a muddy track, in which the slow starters are additionally handicapped by the mud kicked onto them by the early speed.

Sher develops an argument similar to Dennett’s. He, like Dennett, grants that such differences exist; and he also attempts to neutralize such differences in order to preserve claims of just deserts and moral responsibility. But Sher does not appeal merely to “racing luck”; rather, he offers specific suggestions for how such initial differences can be overcome. Sher suggests that an individual with less effort-making ability can negate that disadvantage by greater vigilance or by taking special steps to increase motivation and avoid distractions. And he later extends that claim to ‘other differences in initial ability as well’:

Even if M is initially stronger or more intelligent than N, this difference will only entail that M does not deserve what he has achieved relative to N if the difference between them has made it impossible for N to achieve as much as M. However, differences in strength, intelligence, and other native gifts are rarely so pronounced as to have this effect. The far more common effect of such differences is merely to make it more *difficult* for the less talented person to reach a given level of attainment. He must work harder, husband his resources more carefully, plan more shrewdly, and so on. ([3], pp. 31–2)

That is an appealing scenario: the slow tortoise uses his greater perseverance to nose out the speedier hare, the weak rabbit outwits the powerful bear, the player of modest talents excels through practice and effort. Such stories are heart-warming and even inspiring, but usually they are also false. The less talented are *not* likely to develop greater diligence and perseverance, for those qualities are the conditioned product of successful past efforts, and those who are initially less talented are likely to experience fewer successes and consequently less positive reinforcement for their efforts. Thus less talent is more often linked to lethargy than to perseverance. In similar fashion, less talent is not likely to be offset by greater shrewdness; to the contrary, the more talented have more opportunities to learn game strategy. Shrewd play is a function of playing time, which is likely to be a function of initial talent.

Both Dennett and Sher treat individual characteristics as if they were handed out one at a time by lottery. In fact, talents and abilities (as well as faults and liabilities) have a cumulative effect. Rather than the hare’s speed being offset by the tortoise’s endurance, the speedy hare is likely to be a more successful racer

and thus a more positively reinforced and frequent racer, and thus also better-conditioned.

It is a mistake to suppose that 'luck averages out', that weaknesses in one capacity are balanced by other strengths, and that claims of moral responsibility and just deserts can thus be justified. However, it is *not* a mistake to tell our children the story of the gritty tortoise nosing out the indolent hare, and it is not a mistake to emphasize that disadvantaged starting points can be and sometimes are overcome. That is important for two reasons: first, it helps overcome any lingering fears of fatalism. There is sometimes fear that determinism (or naturalism) makes us helpless pawns of our early environmental-genetic influences. But that is certainly not the inevitable result that many people fear. *If* one strongly desires to break away from the influences and habits of one's early conditioning, then quite often — through effort and planning — one can actually do so. The individual who feels stifled by lack of education can take steps to correct that situation, and (usually) by effort and work the individual can remedy educational deficiencies and achieve the education he or she desires. So one need not feel *trapped* by one's conditioning-environmental history. However, the capacity to work hard to overcome such deficiencies, the intelligence to plan an educational program, the perseverance to carry it out, and — especially — the original desire to gain an education: all of that is the complex product of environmental conditioning-contingencies (the uneven start) for which one is *not* morally responsible. Strenuous efforts really can make things happen. It does not follow that one is *morally responsible* for the effort or its effects.

The second reason that it is important to emphasize what can be accomplished by those who 'really try' — even against bad luck and initial disadvantages — is that emphasis on the possibility of achievements may foster those achievements. Such verbal encouragement should not be overemphasized. Inspiring bedtime stories are no substitute for the early experience of well-ordered, interesting, and progressively more difficult tasks at which individuals can succeed through exerting modest effort. Early effort-enhancing experiences are the key to developing perseverance (and repeated early failure is the key to later lethargy). Still, inspiring stories and encouraging words have their uses. One of my childhood favourites was the story of Dick Whittington, who rose from poverty to become 'thrice Lord Mayor of London town', using only his wits, his hard work, and his lucky mouse-chasing cat. It's a good children's story, with a useful message: if you keep trying, luck will come your way; and through pluck and wit and a bit of luck, one may overcome enormous obstacles and make a great success. The story is a good one, despite the fact that in actuality childhood poverty is likely to produce lethargy, as early deprivation results in early failures and thus the extinguishing of

effort-making behaviour and the deadening of desires and dreams. Still, we should continue telling the story of Dick Whittington. Children who have the good fortune to hear it may be somewhat more likely to develop perseverance. But we should not draw the wrong moral from the story. People can succeed through pluck and effort and wit; and if one has the good fortune to develop such characteristics (through hearing the right bedtime stories and experiencing the right early successes) then one really can accomplish things and achieve important goals. Such worthwhile accomplishments do not, however, justly deserve special credit or reward, since the means of achieving them (perseverance and intelligence) are the result of one's good luck.

In sum, there is every reason to promote (compatibilist) free will and the importance of individual effort. We *can* make things happen, and those who have the good fortune to learn that lesson are more likely to make successful efforts. But such compatibilist freedom does not establish moral responsibility. Whether the result is diligent accomplishment or lethargic failure, the influence of uneven starts and unequal racing lanes undercuts credit and blame.<sup>1</sup>

*Elon College,  
Elon College, NC 27244, U.S.A.*

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Daniel C. Dennett, *Elbow Room* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).
- [2] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).
- [3] George Sher, *Desert* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

<sup>1</sup>Thanks to John G. Sullivan, George N. Schlesinger, George Graham, Terry Moore, and Bryan Hilliard for enlightening discussions of this subject.

## THE BETTER ENDOWED AND THE DIFFERENCE PRINCIPLE

By CHRISTOPHER McMAHON

**I**N *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls proposes that the economic benefits of social cooperation should be distributed in accordance with the difference principle, which allows inequalities only to the extent that they benefit the worst-off members of society — or to be more precise, a representative member of the worst-off group ([3], esp. sect. 13). He defends this claim in part with an argument that the difference principle would be chosen in the original position, but he also raises the question of how it can be justified to the better-off members of society. As Nozick has pointed out, in posing this question Rawls seems to have left the original position