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## Review

# Disadvantage

Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit

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In this rich and rewarding work, Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit set out to ‘provide practical guidance to policy makers by providing a version of egalitarian theory which can be applied to actual social policy’ (p. 3). They argue that despite the differences within the egalitarian tradition, if egalitarians accept that there are people in society who have not achieved sufficiency, then they ought to agree on the same policy prescription in the short to medium term: *identify the worst off and take appropriate steps so that their position can be improved* (p. 3). This gives the book a refreshing practical edge that is coupled with astute philosophical analysis. To tackle their question the authors employ a novel methodology, which they refer to as ‘dynamic public reflective equilibrium’. In contrast to Rawls’ pursuit of equilibrium between a single philosopher’s theory and intuitions, this is a public exercise where the authors conducted interactive interviews (a summary of which appears in the appendix) with social policy experts and disadvantaged people in Israel and the United Kingdom to inform and test their theory.

*Disadvantage* proceeds in three parts. In Part 1, the authors argue for a pluralist conception of advantage and claim that the determinants of well-being are not reducible to a common currency because it is often the case that ‘a shortfall in one dimension cannot be adequately remedied by a greater provision of another good’ (p. 34). This leads them to begin with Sen’s and Nussbaum’s capabilities theory where advantage is ‘not a matter of possession of resources, or of preference satisfaction, but rather of what a person is able to do and to be’ (p. 36). However, they offer some notable revisions to this view by adding four further categories to Nussbaum’s well-known list of 10 functionings (doing good to others, living in a law-abiding fashion, understanding the law and being able to communicate in the local language) and, more importantly, claiming that risk and vulnerability are themselves disadvantages that ought to be taken into account (pp. 65–73). This enables them to show that, for example, a person in secure employment is more advantaged than one in casual employment because they do not face the same

threat of unemployment. In the light of this, they persuasively claim that we must be interested in sustaining functionings (p. 65). They argue that it follows that we must judge the reasonableness of expecting someone to act in one way or another (p. 80). The basic idea is that if exercising an opportunity risks other functionings, it is not a genuine opportunity.

Part 2 discusses the indexing problem – the problem of comparing disadvantage and deciding which functionings are more important than others. Drawing on their interviews, the authors argue that six functionings are most important: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; affiliation; control over one's environment; and sense, imagination and thought (p. 106). They draw on the York model to show how we can measure functionings, but reject the idea that they have to settle on what the most important functioning is because the most serious disadvantages cluster, where clustering is understood as 'correlations among forms of disadvantage' (p. 120).

Part 3 discusses various policy proposals to overcome such clustering and ameliorate the position of the worst-off. To do so, the authors argue that we must mitigate 'corrosive disadvantages' (those that yield further disadvantages) and bring about 'fertile functionings' (the securing of which is likely to secure further functionings). However, these are not mirror images of each other in the sense that 'what causes a problem for someone may not always provide a causal pathway out' (p. 134). In the final two chapters, the authors assess the various arguments that claim to problematize the idea that we ought to give priority to the least advantaged and offer various policy recommendations that might enable us to do so.

While the vast majority of the authors' argument is compelling, I had some minor disagreements with certain aspects of it. In terms of methodology, the authors' use of 'dynamic public reflective equilibrium' is an interesting innovation, but it might have been fruitful to interview a number of politicians or top-level decision makers who have sought to improve the position of the worst-off over a long period of time, but who have also experienced the myriad political impediments to doing so. This might not have altered the more abstractly philosophical elements of the theory, but it could have enabled the authors to think more realistically about how their goal could be achieved in political climates such as our own, where the time and resources devoted to the worst-off are sadly so limited. Because of the practical rather than purely philosophical nature of their task, this omission of politics struck me as unfortunate.

The discussion of the extent to which governments must give priority to the worst-off in chapter 9 was also disappointing. The authors attempt to rebut the claim that doing this will be unreasonably expensive and ineffective by arguing that so long as we continue to research cost-effective means of helping the least advantaged, we have not abandoned them (p. 159). But this fails to get to the

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philosophical heart of the matter and does not, therefore, tackle the principal question, which they realize they need to address, of whether governments must give priority to the worst-off. On a related note, I want to address the authors' suggestion that governments should offer universal benefits in place of means-tested ones. While I agree that ideally we ought to avoid the stigmatization that the means-testing of benefits might engender, I found the idea of universal social provision of all goods excessively idealistic. Given that the authors recognize that the amelioration of the worst-off must occur 'starting from here' (p. 11), it might have been helpful to think realistically about how stigmatization could be minimized with the finite resources typically on offer, rather than to have supposed that sufficient resources would be available to ensure that it could be avoided altogether.

Despite these minor quibbles, *Disadvantage* is a superbly written and compelling analysis of an issue of great philosophical and political importance. I hope that it achieves the wide readership that it so clearly deserves both within the academy and beyond.

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