Is it unjust to be worse off due to bad luck?

An evaluative essay by Olivia Jackson, exploring the philosophical relationship between luck, individual responsibility and justice, and questioning whether inequalities arising from circumstances beyond our control can ever be considered fair.

The claim that it is unjust to be worse off due to bad luck is central to luck egalitarianism, a viewpoint associated with philosophers such as Ronald Dworkin and G. A. Cohen. Luck egalitarians argue that inequalities that arise from brute luck- factors beyond an individual's control- are unjust. Conversely, inequalities that arise from voluntary choice, are deemed acceptable. While this view captures powerful concepts regarding fairness, I argue that it ultimately fails as a theory of justice. Though it is certainly unjust for individuals to be disadvantaged by bad luck, luck egalitarianism provides the wrong explanation for why this is the case. A more convincing account understands injustice not merely as a consequence of individual decisions but in terms of ensuring relations of equal respect and standing among citizens.

At first glance, luck egalitarianism provides a seemingly compelling distinction between brute luck and option luck. For example, Dworkin defines option luck as the outcome of deliberate risk, whereas brute luck concerns circumstances beyond an individual's control. From this perspective, justice requires neutralising the consequences of brute luck but necessitates that consequences derived from choices must be endured. Dworkin's famous 'auction' thought experiment illustrates this idea: individuals start with equal resources and bid for goods in a hypothetical auction, ensuring that no one envies another's set of goods. Therefore, any resulting inequalities- provided they reflect individual choices- are considered just. Similarly, Cohen argues that egalitarian justice requires equality, except where inequality "reflects choice".

The appeal of such a perspective is clear. It reflects the idea that fairness requires compensating for disadvantages people did not choose, while respecting individuals as responsible agents. For example, it seems unjust that someone born into poverty or with a disability should be worse off through no fault of their own. Luck egalitarianism addresses this by insisting that such inequalities require correction. In spite of this, luck egalitarianism manages to balance responsibility with equality by ensuring individuals are still held accountable for pursuing their own plans, even if these lead to worse outcomes.

However, this balance is unstable. A fundamental problem of the luck egalitarianist framework is that it depends on an acute distinction between choice and luck which is unsustainable in practice. As critics have exposed, most choices are subordinate to outside factors such as social background, upbringing and opportunity. Stemplowska identifies that any account of responsibility must presuppose a prior "structure of opportunities" that determines what options are available to individuals. For instance, if someone chooses a low-paying job, this may reflect limited opportunities rather than genuine freedom. As a result, it becomes unclear whether disadvantages truly reflect choice or whether they are themselves shaped by luck. Hence, the clearcut division between brute and option luck becomes futile.

More importantly, luck egalitarianism leads to profound morally impermissible implications. Firstly, it suggests that individuals who make imprudent choices may justly be left to suffer severe hardship. Someone who chooses not to work, or who makes poor financial decisions, may be denied assistance, on the grounds that their situation is self-inflicted. This incurs what is often called the "harshness objection". Just because individuals are responsible for their

plight does not make it reasonable that justice should abandon them as doing so would conflict with widely accepted moral beliefs about compassion and basic dignity.

This intertwines with a second, deeper criticism: luck egalitarianism risks undermining the equality it ostensibly promotes. Its primary focus on the responsibility of individuals for their misfortune demands intrusive and potentially demeaning judgements about people's choices. If individuals seek help, they must justify their claims by demonstrating that they are victims of bad luck rather than architects of their own affliction. The result may be humiliating, making it incompatible with treating people equally. Equality, therefore, becomes conditional on innocence, rather than shared moral intuitions.

An alternative approach, as suggested by luck egalitarianist critics such as Elizabeth Anderson, focuses on social relations rather than distributive patterns. From this viewpoint equality exists not to eliminate all luck-based inequalities, but to ensure individuals relate to one another as equals, without prejudice, stigma or exclusion. The emphasis is not on whether disadvantage is deserved or undeserved, but whether social arrangements allow all members of society to participate equally. From this perspective, leaving people worse off due to bad luck is unjust not because luck is intrinsically unfair, but because it leads to social hierarchies where individuals are not treated equally. However, this relationship approach perhaps rejects the role of individual responsibility too extremely. If all disadvantages, regardless of choice, are treated as matters for social redress, this may undermine personal agency and accountability. Hypothetically therefore, luck egalitarianism does apprehend an important insight: that justice should, to some extent, incorporate responsibility. Therefore, the challenge is not to eliminate responsibility altogether but ensure that it does not sacrifice equal respect.

This approach avoids some of the crucial problems associated with luck egalitarianism. It does not require making an implausibly harsh distinction between choice and luck, or abandoning individuals who make poor decisions. Rather, it emphasises the importance of establishing conditions where all citizens function as equals. Rawls' theory of justice, for example, reflects this concern by suggesting that inequalities are justified only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society. This ensures that even those who are worse off remain included, thus upholding fair cooperation.

Nevertheless, this relational view does not fully reject the principles behind luck egalitarianism. It remains valid that it is unjust for individuals to be disadvantaged as a result of brute luck, particularly when such disadvantage prevents them from participating as equal members of society. However, such injustice should not be understood in terms of responsibility, but as a failure for social systems to secure equal conditions for all. The fundamental problem with luck egalitarianism is not its concern with bad luck, but its attempt to make it justified that people should be judged primarily on their decisions.

In conclusion, it is indeed unjust to be worse off due to bad luck, but luck egalitarianism's account for why this is unjust is inadequate. By focusing on the distinction between luck and choice, it overlooks broader conditions that shape choices and outcomes, thereby creating the risk of imposing harsh and demeaning judgements. A more convincing perspective understands injustice in relational terms- i.e. as a failure to secure more equitable standing amongst individuals. Therefore, rather than focusing on determine responsibility for outcomes, justice should aim to ensure that all members of society can participate as equals, regardless of luck.