How Equal Should Opportunities Be?

David Azerrad

In 1864, Abraham Lincoln gave a short speech to a sanitary fair in Baltimore. While the address itself is of little note, it does contain a passage that sheds much light on the character of political debates in America. “The world has never had a good definition of the word liberty,” said Lincoln, “and the American people, just now, are much in want of one. We all declare for liberty; but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing.”

What Lincoln said of liberty applies equally to our other core political ideals. In America, we don’t disagree about whether equality, rights, and democracy are good. We disagree about what they entail. And so, when it comes to “equality of opportunity” — perhaps the most cherished term in our political lexicon — nearly all Americans embrace the idea. About 95% of us agree that “everyone in America should have an equal opportunity to get ahead.” But we don’t all understand this to mean the same thing. We differ widely about how to gauge whether opportunities are indeed equal, and over how much should be done — and by whom — to equalize opportunities. At its root, our ongoing debate about the vitality of the American Dream and the promise of equality of opportunity underlying it is really a debate over what life owes us and what we owe one another.

Because equality of opportunity looms so large over our politics, it is crucial that we better understand its different meanings. Conservatives, in particular, need to gain clarity about the left’s expansive view of equality of opportunity as equality of life chances — arguably the central moral doctrine of modern liberalism. To be sure, it is a powerful idea because it appeals directly to our democratic prejudices. The challenge

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we face is how to resist this siren song and its damaging implications, while continuing to champion sound policies that can expand opportunity for those who were born into challenging circumstances.

**OPPORTUNITY AND DISCRIMINATION**

As it first presents itself, the idea of equality of opportunity has a rather limited scope. It applies not to all of the opportunities that life may offer, but primarily to economic and educational opportunities for career advancement. We speak of an equal-opportunity employer, not of an equal-opportunity church or family. Under a regime of equal opportunity, desirable positions in the public and private sectors are open to all and should be awarded on the basis of merit. Human nature being what it is, nepotism continues to exist, but it is rarely defended publicly in America.

In a democracy, however, positions and careers are more than ends unto themselves. They are also avenues of upward social and economic mobility. Equality of opportunity thus grows to encompass the broader idea that people’s station in life is not fixed at birth and that society should provide opportunities to improve it.

In this broader sense, equality of opportunity melds two distinct ideas: the availability of opportunities to improve one’s lot in life and the actual ability of people to take advantage of those opportunities. The equivocal nature of the term will inevitably give rise to disagreements about its meaning.

In a country such as ours which upholds the idea of equality of opportunity, people will inevitably set their sights on eliminating the barriers that prevent people from competing for positions and getting ahead in life. To think through the various meanings of equality of opportunity, it is helpful, then, to distinguish among the sources of unequal opportunities in life. Broadly speaking, they are the law, the private sector, and the so-called “birth lottery.” The first covers the way the state deals with us. The second concerns our dealings with one another—especially in the workplace and the marketplace. The third points to the fact that we are each profoundly shaped, for better and for worse, by the parents we are born to and who raise us, and by the communities in which we grow up.

In the first sense then, equality of opportunity can be understood as a legal concept: “Equal laws protecting equal rights,” as James Madison
put it. The laws may not create opportunities for some that it denies to others. And while laws must, at times, make reasonable distinctions among citizens (such as between minors and adults), they may not unjustly discriminate against or in favor of any one group of citizens, either by arbitrarily granting special privileges to some or by placing additional burdens on others.

On this idea of equality before law, all agree (at least in principle). Many, however, find it insufficient because it forbids discrimination only by the government, allowing citizens and other private entities to discriminate. If discrimination by the state is wrong, many ask, shouldn’t discrimination by private actors also be outlawed? When it comes to some of the most important areas of life—like college admissions, employment, and housing—should the government not forbid private discrimination to ensure that people are allowed to compete solely on the basis of merit?

The meritocratic underpinnings of this argument are appealing. Most Americans today accept the idea that equality of opportunity should extend to large parts of the private sphere and that the government has a legitimate role to play in enforcing anti-discrimination laws. Though many libertarians still oppose it on freedom-of-contract grounds, even conservatives, who have in the past opposed such government intervention on constitutional grounds, have largely made their peace with it.

**The End of Discrimination?**

Many contemporary liberals, however, wind up rejecting in practice the idea that the state should forbid discrimination through their efforts to vindicate it. Their starting point is the not-altogether-unreasonable worry that in spite of anti-discrimination laws, certain forms of covert discrimination may still be restricting opportunities for disadvantaged groups. As Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote in her *Ricci v. DeStefano* dissent, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act forbade “overtly race-based job classifications,” but “did not usher in genuinely equal opportunity. More subtle—and sometimes unconscious—forms of discrimination replaced once undisguised restrictions.”

How, then, can we truly know that we have completely eliminated the scourge of discrimination? For many liberals the answer is simple: when “historically marginalized groups” are proportionally represented in all important sectors of life and, we should add, not over-represented
in the undesirable domains of life. As the Leadership Conference, which bills itself as the “nation’s premier civil & human rights coalition,” explains, “If equality of opportunity were a reality, African Americans, women, people with disabilities and other groups facing discrimination would be fairly represented in the nation’s work force and educational institutions.” This, it claims, is a “common-sense notion.”

In other words, equal results — as applied to groups — become the measure of equal opportunities. Liberals do not embrace individual equality of outcomes (though they are uncomfortable with great income disparities), but many do think that if America were a true meritocracy, then the various groups — both marginalized and marginalizing — would all succeed (and fail) at comparable rates. The rich and diverse tapestry of American life should be reflected in Congress, in the boardroom, and in the college classroom — but also in the detention hall, the courtroom, and the prison courtyard.

This utopian goal appears possible to its advocates because they surmise that all the various identity groups — and their endless permutations and combinations — aspire to the same things. One would think that the left, which has made diversity its rallying cry, would notice that the communities that make up our multicultural republic do not understand the American Dream the same way, do not universally accept the liberal definition of success, and do not value the same things. Just as we cannot assume that discrimination never prevents some Americans from pursuing certain opportunities, so too should we not assume that all groups desire to pursue the same opportunities at the same rates. Not all preferences are alike. Not all opportunities will be seized.

To vindicate the principle of equal opportunity by achieving a society that reflects American diversity in all venues, liberals tend to challenge the standards by which individuals are selected, promoted, or punished. They do so in one of two ways. The first approach calls for selection standards to be relaxed for certain groups so as to increase their likelihood of success. This line of reasoning provides justification for most affirmative-action programs. The second approach, by contrast, attacks the standards of selection themselves. Any policy is suspect if it has a “disparate impact” on certain groups — even if it is applied equally to all and even if it was adopted without any intention to discriminate.

A few years ago, for instance, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission sued Kaplan Higher Education for requiring credit checks
on all prospective employees. Kaplan adopted the practice after discovering that some of its employees had stolen financial-aid payments from students. Kaplan’s logic was that employees facing financial duress would be more likely to steal—reasoning that the EEOC itself uses when hiring new employees. The requirement applied to all applicants and was adopted to respond to a business problem. Nevertheless, the EEOC sued Kaplan on the grounds that its policy had a “disparate impact” on African-Americans. The EEOC disingenuously alleged that Kaplan “engaged in a pattern or practice of unlawful discrimination by refusing to hire a class of black job applicants nationwide.”

A focus on results will inevitably lead to some being denied a position because of their skin color or sex and others to obtain one simply because of their skin color or sex. At this point, the contradiction between these practices and the meritocratic principle liberals claim to vindicate becomes apparent.

**The Birth Lottery**

Many who are committed to the idea of a meritocratic society eventually begin to wonder whether we actually merit our “merit.” After all, so much of what we pride ourselves on can plausibly be traced back to good genes and good parenting. Conversely, so much of what we deplore in ourselves can be blamed on our upbringing and larger societal forces. How much of life truly is the result of our own decisions and efforts? How much is just the luck of the draw in the birth lottery?

These are legitimate questions that do not admit of simple answers. In thinking them through, some conclude that the meritocratic ideal is ultimately just a comforting illusion to allow the lucky few to relish their unearned privilege. As then-chairman of the Federal Reserve Ben Bernanke told the 2013 Princeton graduates, “[A] meritocracy is a system in which the people who are the luckiest in their health and genetic endowment; luckiest in terms of family support, encouragement, and, probably, income; luckiest in their educational and career opportunities; and luckiest in so many other ways difficult to enumerate—these are the folks who reap the largest rewards.”

Under such a system, careers and social position may in principle appear open to all, but in reality the spoils go to the well-born. “Equality of opportunity,” John Rawls writes, “means an equal chance to leave the less fortunate behind in the personal quest for influence and position.”
By treating alike the rich and the poor, the lucky and the unlucky, the privileged and the disadvantaged, more limited conceptions of equality of opportunity with their focus on eliminating discrimination fail to remedy the vast inequalities of background which tilt the playing field in favor of some and against others.

The analogy of choice to explain this state of affairs is the “race of life.” It’s all well and good to ensure that the rules are applied equally once the starting gun has been fired, liberals say, but it really isn’t much of a race when some have been training for years while others couldn’t even afford a pair of running shoes. As Teddy Roosevelt explained in 1910, after his progressive turn, “I know perfectly well that men in a race run at unequal rates of speed. I don’t want the prize to go to the man who is not fast enough to win it on his merits, but I want them to start fair.”

A completely fair footrace, according to some liberal theorists, would require that the accidents of birth play no role in determining where we end up in life. For them, the ultimate end goal is to decouple life prospects from the circumstances of birth. As President Barack Obama explained in his Second Inaugural Address,

We are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that she has the same chance to succeed as anybody else, because she is an American; she is free, and she is equal, not just in the eyes of God but also in our own.

Most Americans would probably reflexively agree with this statement as it seems to capture the promise that our lot in life is not fixed at birth. In truth, it points to a redefinition of equality of opportunity as equality of life chances. According to this view, positions should not only be open for all — we should all have the same chance to obtain them. We should not only have opportunities to get ahead — we should all have the same chance of ending up at the top.

The implications of this redefinition are far-reaching. Underlying this claim about equality of life chances is the assumption that it is unfair to allow factors over which we have no control to shape our lives. Embedded in this claim is the denial of divine providence and the implication that fortune should be completely tamed. Every aspect of life should be brought under human control to allow each individual to freely fashion himself into whatever he wants, unburdened by any
genealogical or sociological baggage. “When there is equality of op-
portunity,” writes Yale University’s John Roemer, one of the leading
theorists on the subject, “then, no one will be worse off than others as a
result of factors beyond her control.”

Liberals do not however carry this imperative through to its end
goal, as it would require all of us to have the same genes. In *A Theory
of Justice*, for example, Rawls admits that, although “no one deserves
his greater natural capacity,” “it does not follow that one should elimi-
nate these distinctions.” Following Rawls’s lead, liberals simply assume
a random distribution of native endowments across the various social
classes. They set their sights on ensuring that all have an equal oppor-
tunity to develop their innate talents, which will then allow them to
freely compete for careers and social positions. Conceding that nature
sets the upper limit of what is possible for each individual, they aim to
create a society in which all have the resources necessary to reach their
full potential, however they may define it.

Liberals also recognize that the autonomy of the family poses an
intractable problem to ensuring every child has the same chance to suc-
ceed. Although we are all born equal, we are not all born to equally
good parents. In an interview to promote his latest book, *Our Kids*,
Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam invoked the invisible “backpack” of
privilege to emphasize the crucial role that parenting plays in the lives
of children:

> When kids come to school, the rich kids are bringing in their
backpack support from family, both moral support and encour-
agements and so on. And the poor kids are bringing from their
neighborhoods gang violence and depression and family disrup-
tion and so on. Not that the kids themselves are responsible for it,
but that’s in their backpack.

We need not conduct a longitudinal study to confirm Putnam’s point.
By emphasizing the importance of the family, he is merely stating the
obvious. No one would deny the critical role that parents play in shap-
ing the opportunities available to children and their ability to seize
them. So what should be done for children who, in liberal parlance,
were unlucky in the birth lottery? What do we owe, not *our* kids, but
the kids of others?
Given the overwhelming evidence that a good familial upbringing considerably boosts a child’s odds of success in life, the most obvious answer would be a robust pro-family agenda that encourages marriage. If, as Putnam writes, “more single parents means less upward mobility,” it follows that it would be best if as many children as possible grew up in intact families. The liberal goal of equality of life chances would seem to require strong families with two married parents.

By and large, however, mainstream liberals have not been champions of the traditional family. To a certain extent, this disjuncture stems from a recognition, rarely found on the left, about the limited powers of the government to improve society. Liberals who recognize the importance of the family do not think the government can do all that much to revive and strengthen marriage. The Brookings Institution’s Isabel Sawhill, for example, regrets the decline of marriage but thinks “the genie is out of the bottle” and that no “amount of wishful thinking will put it back.” Conservatives, she thinks, are right that “marriage is the best environment yet invented for raising children. However, government efforts to promote marriage have not worked in practice. And cultural trends, once they gain a certain momentum, are hard to reverse.” She, along with Putnam, thinks that the only hope for reviving marriage and strong families lies with civic and religious institutions.

Sawhill and Putnam are to a certain extent right. The fourfold increase in the out-of-wedlock birthrate and the near doubling of the divorce rate since the 1960s are the result of tectonic shifts in American culture that cannot simply be reversed with a new federal program. That is not to say that public policy is too blunt of a tool to make a difference. Quite the contrary. It is well established by now that marriage penalties in welfare programs and the rise of no-fault divorce have contributed to the decline of marriage. As such, these penalties could be curbed so that, at the very least, they no longer discourage marriage, while states could tighten their divorce laws and promote reconciliation to help more couples remain married.

Liberals’ reluctance to support pro-family policies that would boost the life prospects of children also stems from their ultimately stronger commitment to the sexual revolution and the autonomy of adults. Liberals may admit that children raised by their married biological parents fare better, but they also believe that traditional marriage can be stifling and that no-fault divorce allows people trapped in loveless
marriages to find their happiness. The modern liberal ethos simply cannot command adults to subordinate their happiness to that of their children.

The Fairness Doctrine

Since liberals do not generally adopt a strong pro-family agenda, they instead place their trust in government to make up for the unequal upbringings that result from unwed childbearing and the fragmentation of the family. If the birth lottery cannot be abolished and if little can (or should) be done to shore up the family, then liberals’ only hope to level opportunities between the privileged and the underprivileged and equalize life chances is the power of the state. “Unless equality of opportunity is going to be nothing more than a hollow formalism,” progressive pundit Matthew Yglesias writes, “you need a lot of government support.”

Though the race of life will never be completely fair, liberals still insist upon government programs that aim to help underprivileged children catch up with others. At every stage of a child’s life—from the womb, throughout childhood, and then onto adolescence—there should be a program in place to make up for the differences in family background, whether it be prenatal care to improve the lifestyle of expectant mothers, Head Start, or Title I funding for schools in low-income districts. The failures of these programs to show results leave liberals unfazed. Thus, for Sawhill and her Brookings colleague Quentin Karpilow, the fact that early-childhood education has no lasting impact only proves that “we may have to combine early childhood initiatives with interventions in elementary school, adolescence, and beyond.” They concede that they “have yet to find a single intervention that will dramatically improve children’s life chances.” But that is no reason “to wait for one to be invented in order to begin making real progress.”

Ultimately, such initiatives will only go so far in narrowing the opportunity gap as they address only one side of the inequality equation. The race of life is unfair not just because some are poorly prepared to compete in it, but also because some are too well prepared. To truly improve the odds of success of the former, it would be necessary to decrease the odds of success of the latter. So the logic of fairness eventually leads some on the left to contemplate how to legitimately deprive
privileged children of certain advantages that needlessly and unfairly accentuate the opportunity gap.

This has become known as the problem of “opportunity hoarding.” As Richard Reeves and Kimberly Howard of the Brookings Institution explain:

Of course advantage is passed down from one generation to the next in many ways that are benign, fair, and legitimate. Nobody is going to suggest affluent parents stop reading bedtime stories to their children in the interests of equal opportunity. But there may be some transmission mechanisms that are less legitimate.

The question then becomes how to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate advantages bestowed by parents onto their children. Reeves proposes banning legacy admissions at elite universities and curtailing the number of unpaid internships so that fewer of them are off limits to young people who cannot afford to forgo pay. The British philosopher Adam Swift would ban private schools to prevent the children of the wealthy from getting a leg up on others. But even that would still allow wealthy parents to donate large sums of money to their children’s public schools. Three years ago, the Montgomery County school board in Maryland considered restricting private donations to public schools with a view to leveling the playing field. The French president François Hollande went even further with a proposal, floated at the Sorbonne a few years ago, to ban homework in order to “restore equality,” since not all parents can equally help their children.

At this point, the left’s conception of equality of opportunity as equality of life chances reveals its unsettling implications. To fully equalize opportunities and ensure all a fair shot in the race of life would require not only removing any limits upon the role of government, but also actively intruding upon the autonomy of the family. It would lead to calls to curtail the opportunities of others and strip away their inherited advantages. No one would want to live in a society in which the liberal logic of equality of opportunity had worked itself out fully.

It is true that liberals, when pressed, will admit that full equality of life chances is not possible. Yet, in spite of their disavowals, there are many enamored with the idea of making life more fair and equalizing opportunities. Modern liberalism is anchored in the proposition that
it is unfair to allow factors over which individuals have no control to decisively affect their lives. Hence, even a reluctant avowal that equality of life chances cannot be achieved does not lead to a reconsideration of fairness as the guiding moral principle.

The full version of equality of opportunity as equality of life chances will forever remain a chimera. It may titillate scholars and pundits and make for good campaign-speech material, but there is little appetite in America for policies that significantly restrict the ability of parents to do all they can, within the bounds of the law, to give their children every advantage in life.

The real danger is the one posed to the American national character. Appeals to fairness erode the spirit of self-reliance and the entrepreneurial zeal that Americans are known for around the world. Judged by the standard of fairness, meritocracy proves to be a sham. It conceals the overwhelming power of brute chance in determining our lives. In a panel discussion at Georgetown University in May of 2015, President Obama referred to the wealthy as “society’s lottery winners.”

In this view, free will need not be completely sacrificed on the altar of fortune, but it must accept a much-diminished role. The foundations on which the American Dream have traditionally rested—hard work, determination, and grit—will inevitably be downplayed. This is the paradox of the left’s invocation of fairness as the standard by which to judge the promise of equality of opportunity. In trying to help the unfortunate, liberals end up turning them away from what they most need to help themselves: the belief that one’s lot in life is not fixed at birth and that hard work does pay off. By contrast, conservatives (and libertarians), while acknowledging the importance of upbringing, affirm the primacy of individual effort by putting the onus on the individual to work hard. In upholding the meritocratic ideal, they teach citizens that individuals can overcome adversity and rise from adverse circumstances. This belief, more than anything else, empowers individuals to pursue opportunities and to try again, if at first they fail.

REFRAMING THE QUESTION

Though it may be attractive, the liberal understanding of equality of opportunity as equality of life chances is neither possible nor desirable. Conservatives are right to oppose it. This does not mean they remain indifferent to helping disadvantaged children overcome the difficult
circumstances into which they were born. The key is for them to do so without sacrificing their commitment to the rule of law, meritocracy, and effective, limited government.

The first step is to overcome the flawed race-of-life formulation, since it inexorably points to the expansive liberal definition of equality of opportunity. Life is not a race. It is a journey whose goal is happiness. And happiness is not a finite national resource—there is plenty of it to go around. One person’s happiness need not come at the expense of others. Of course, we can’t all be happy all the time, but that is less because we are all racing against one another than because of the endless vagaries of human life.

If we take our bearings from the Declaration of Independence, rather than from a metaphorical footrace, we can see that we are not all racing toward the same finish line, but all pursuing happiness in our own way. Some want to be baseball players; others choose to become priests. Some are gifted musicians; others have a knack for languages.

In *Coming Apart*, Charles Murray argues that happiness for most people is found in four realms: faith, community, family, and vocation. The race of life analogy breaks down in each one. Faith, community, and family are not zero-sum games. As for vocation, any given job opening can only go to one person, but there are many job openings in any given field and countless fields in which to make a career. It is true that life in a commercial republic is competitive. This competition can be fierce—especially at the top. But happiness does not require one to be at the top. And even those cases that pit people squarely against one another do not make a race out of life. At most, they suggest that in life there are many competitions. You can lose one, pick yourself up, and move on to another.

Some will always be better placed than others to obtain any given position, but such is life. There can be no definitive remedy for the accidents of birth. Justice demands that we right the wrongs we commit to one another. It does not require, as the liberal conception of fairness does, that we fully make up for the accidents of birth. Liberals tend to find this vexing. Putnam thinks that “to hold kids responsible for their parents’ failings violates most Americans’ moral sensibility.” But we do not hold children responsible for their parents’ failings. We do not force them to assume their parents’ debts or their criminal records. Parents have a duty to care for their children and to raise them to be responsible,
self-governing citizens. When they do not, the fault lies primarily with them—not with the country at large.

While we cannot be indifferent to the fate of these children, no government program or civic endeavor can ever adequately make up for the absence of doting, loving parents. There is nothing cruel or heartless in accepting what would have once been considered an obvious truth. To recognize that others will have a greater chance to succeed than they will is not, however, to condemn them to a life of poverty and misery or to prevent them from pursuing the American Dream. Simply acknowledging that we do not all have the same chance to succeed in life does not mean we should not strive to improve the chances of those who face the longest odds.

In addressing the question of what we owe children born into bleak circumstances, conservatives must be careful not to do so on terms set by the left. Liberals are inclined to equate collective action with governmental action, usually at the federal level. While conservatives do not oppose government intervention, they know that the federal government, being farthest removed from the people, is least capable of developing effective policies tailored to particular communities.

What’s more, collective action is not exclusive to government. One of the defining characteristics of America is its robust civil society. We help others not just through the programs run by the government, but through the myriad associations we form and to which we donate time and money. A vibrant civil society will be better attuned to the needs of those born into unfortunate circumstances and be better able to offer the tough love that is often necessary to help people.

A Conservative Opportunity Agenda

Like liberals, conservatives recognize that there is an opportunity gap between the children of the privileged and those of the underprivileged. All can see that the former not only have more opportunities available to them, but they are also better equipped to seize them. It is not the fact that some have more than others that bothers conservatives, however; it is that some do not have enough. Conservatives are concerned that we are failing to meet the basic threshold of opportunity that America should promise to all. A conservative opportunity agenda should therefore focus on expanding opportunity rather than shrinking the opportunity gap (though in doing so, of course, the gap will shrink).
The opportunity deficit, as conservatives see it, has two dimensions: There are not as many opportunities as there should be, and the culture, which in the past had empowered people to take advantage of opportunities, has grown weaker. On the one hand, slow economic growth leads to less job creation, while cronyism creates artificial barriers to entry that close off too many sectors of the economy to competition from newcomers. On the other hand, the virtues and the mindset necessary to take advantage of existing opportunities, along with the institutions that instill them, are being steadily eroded among Americans on the lower end of the income scale by a dysfunctional culture. A conservative agenda will therefore aim, first, to ensure the maximum availability of job and career opportunities and, second, to instill the mindset and virtues that empower people, regardless of their background, to seize opportunities and get ahead in life.

Any conservative plan must therefore begin by promoting economic growth, which is necessary for job creation. This is axiomatic on the right and requires little elaboration. Liberals, by contrast, tend to pay less attention to the crucial role that the private sector plays in creating job and career opportunities. They often seem more concerned with ensuring that all can fairly compete for existing positions, rather than creating more positions to compete for. Whereas they want to start by leveling the current playing field, conservatives want to start by widening it.

Conservatives believe that the simplest way to do so is to tear down all government-imposed roadblocks to opportunity that artificially restrict the supply of positions. While liberals are always on the lookout for racial discrimination by private actors, they tend to be strangely indifferent to government-created discrimination against new entrants trying to compete with established players. For example, in every jurisdiction in America, licensing requirements create cartels and make it unnecessarily complicated and costly for newcomers to practice certain professions. Before the advent of Uber, for instance, almost all cities denied many people with drivers’ licenses but few other skills a simple way to earn a living by needlessly restricting the number of taxicabs in operation. All 50 states currently require a license to be a cosmetologist or a barber. Louisiana even licenses florists. All in all, nearly one-third of all jobs today require a government license.

The government, of course, has a legitimate and important role to play in regulating certain important areas of life. In doing so, however, it
should not close off sectors of the economy to those willing to work, invest, produce, buy, and sell unless the public good truly demands it. Much as we reject the idea that the law should not explicitly discriminate against any one class of citizens, we should not allow the law to tacitly discriminate in favor of certain established interests at the expense of newcomers.

The much harder task conservatives confront is how to address the cultural problems that prevent many from taking advantage of existing opportunities or creating their own. Unlike liberals who are more inclined to focus on economic impediments to upward mobility, conservatives worry more about the erosion of the virtues, the mindset, and the whole way of life that helps people improve their lot in life. Charles Murray has chronicled the cultural divide in America between those who get married, work, obey the law, and regularly attend religious services and those who don’t—and how the latter are worse off because of it. William Voegeli has written about the divide between those who subscribe to an ethic of achievement, which empowers people, and those who preach an ethic of aggrievement, which fosters resentment.

In pointing to the importance of character and culture, conservatives are not blind to the fact that material hardship can hold people back. That is why they support effective programs that allow motivated people to get ahead. But it is easier to overcome material hardship with the right mindset and character than it is for material benefits to make up for cultural pathologies. Conservatives therefore insist that those who shape our culture tirelessly preach the gospel of work and marriage, and the virtues associated with them. Our culture should send clear messages to all children, rich and poor alike, that work and marriage are not part of a repressive bourgeois moral order, but make for the cornerstone of a well-lived life.

Without a well-formed character and a belief that hard work pays off in the long run, most of the opportunities that America continues to offer cannot be converted into accomplishments. Parents, schools, and society at large have a duty to ingrain in children and publicly extol the virtues necessary to pursue the American Dream: patience, delayed gratification, self-restraint, grit, determination, fortitude, and foresight. In part because virtue cannot be quantified and measured, it tends to be ignored in the endless public-policy debates on equality of opportunity. But there can be no discussion of opportunity without a discussion of the virtues necessary to seize opportunity.
The family, of course, plays a crucial role in character formation and in shaping the capacity of children to later compete for opportunities. While conservatives recognize the immensity of the challenge of rebuilding a marriage culture—especially among those without a college degree where marriage has fared worst—they should not give up on the task. At the very least, they should aim to increase the likelihood that children are raised by married parents exercising responsibility for their households. This can be done, in part, by reforming welfare programs so that they promote marriage and work and discourage self-destructive behavior such as drug abuse. Only a few of the dozens of means-tested programs providing cash, food, housing, medical assistance, and other social services administered by the federal government include a work requirement for able-bodied adults. Only 15 states screen welfare recipients for drug use. On top of this, all means-tested programs contain a marriage penalty: As household earnings rise—from adding a working spouse—benefits decline. If a low-income, single mother marries the father of her children, she will likely lose a substantial amount of benefits, whereas if the couple remains unmarried, they can maximize their benefits.

Lastly, education reform must be part of any opportunity agenda. Beyond the obvious goal of ensuring their physical safety, the first duty any republic has vis-à-vis the next generation is to ensure they receive a good education that prepares them to enter the workforce, become informed citizens, and make the most of the opportunities their country has to offer. We need not set the goal of preparing every child to go to college. But there is no reason why every healthy child in America—including those born into the bleakest poverty—should not know how to read, write, and do arithmetic after a decade of compulsory schooling. This is an eminently achievable goal, and our failure to achieve it is a national disgrace—especially since we have more than tripled per-pupil spending in the last 50 years and today spend more on education than almost any other country in the world. By failing to impart basic literacy and numeracy, our schools are effectively putting most of the opportunities that America offers beyond the reach of countless children. And by making a high-school diploma less valuable, they are making college degrees more valuable than they should be.

There are many policies the government—whether at the federal, state, or local level—can enact and many initiatives civic groups and
individuals can pursue to expand opportunity. Fleshing out all the details of an opportunity agenda for the right is a topic for another essay. Its broad contours and limiting principles, however, are clear. A conservative opportunity agenda should foster economic growth, oppose government favoritism, and center on marriage, work, education, and the virtues necessary to pursue each one. And it should operate within the confines of the rule of law, meritocracy, and effective, impartial, limited government.

This more modest opportunity agenda will not reach the soaring rhetorical heights of the liberal opportunity agenda. It will not promise every child in America the same chance to succeed in life. But it will promise every child a good education, plentiful job and career opportunities, and a chance to become a respectable, contributing member of society. It will teach every child that the American Dream starts with hard work. It will strive to eliminate all the artificial government-imposed roadblocks to opportunity. And unlike the liberal dream of equality of life chances, it has the virtue of being achievable.