

ALL'S FAIR IN LIFE AND MONOPOLY, OR IS IT?

PETER SAUNDERS

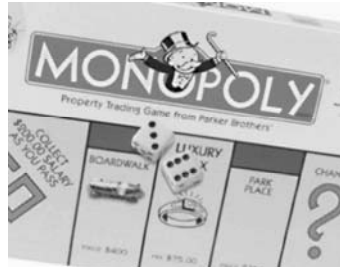
An egalitarian, a meritocrat and a classical liberal once sat down to play the board game, Monopoly. All agreed at the outset that it would be fair to give each player the same amount of cash with which to play. The egalitarian thought this was fair because everybody should always have the same. The meritocrat thought it was fair because it created a level playing field on which everybody could compete. The classical liberal thought it was fair because it gave nobody any special favors (the same rules applied to everybody) and it violated nobody's property rights (since the cash at the start of the game belongs to nobody). So the game began.

Within quite a short time, pandemonium broke out.

"This is no longer fair," cried the egalitarian. "Some people now have more money and property than others. Why should I have to put up with Baltic Avenue when you are sitting there with Boardwalk? We should redistribute to get back as close as we can to the equal shares with which we started."

The meritocrat, too, was troubled: "I don't agree that we should all end up with the same amount, but I have noticed that those who have played with the most skill and who have taken the game most seriously are not being properly rewarded by the fall of the dice. I have no money yet I have tried hard to succeed. Surely diligence and ability deserve more recognition than they are getting!"

The classical liberal sighed: "We have all played by the rules. Nobody has cheated, and nobody has stolen anybody else's money or title deeds. Nobody pre-ordained the present distribution of money and property—it is the aggregated outcome of each individual's free and uncoerced actions and decisions. How, then, can this distribution be considered unfair?"



What would be unfair is if we agreed by a majority vote to take money or property from the most successful player to share it out among the other two, or to give more to the player deemed most deserving. If we were to do that, we would undermine the

principle that the same rules must apply to all players. The best player would then probably go elsewhere, and our game sooner or later would collapse into bickering and chaos."

The three players glared at each other, each wondering how the other two could be so naïve. Each player was convinced that his own definition of "fairness" was self evidently correct. Compromise was out of the question, for it was clearly impossible to share out the assets equally and to reward the most talented player most highly and to leave everybody with the property to which they had established just title.

Shaking the dice and landing in jail, the meritocrat began to sulk. Fined for landing on Boardwalk, the egalitarian kicked the board over in a fit of righteous indignation and began to draw up a petition. The classical liberal picked up the dice, bade the other two farewell, and went off in search of a game of Chutes and Ladders.

This article is an excerpt of a longer article that first appeared in Policy, a quarterly publication of the Centre for Independent Studies in Australia. It is reprinted with permission from CIS. Saunders is the Director of Social Policy Research at the Centre.

What would be unfair is if we agreed by a majority vote to take money or property from the most successful player to share it out among the other two, or to give more to the player deemed most deserving.