In this engaging book, Paul Gomberg argues against what he calls the liberal or neoclassicist view of equal opportunity, and proposes in its place a conception in which everyone has access to social esteem. The liberal/neoclassicist view is exemplified by Roemer (1998) ’s theory, which Gomberg finds inadequate, because it is “competitive”: necessarily, some end up better off than others in the competition for social goods. [Roemer’s theory, Gomberg correctly points out, is a descendent of the theories of Dworkin (1981), Arneson (1989), and G. A. Cohen (1989).] Gomberg’s dissatisfaction with this theory is that, he says, it equalizes opportunities among groups (or types), not among individuals. This is somewhat of a mis-characterization: Roemer’s equal-opportunity algorithm equalizes outcomes among types, and as such is said to equalize opportunities among individuals. What Gomberg objects to is that some must lose, in the sense of ending up significantly worse off than others, in the kinds of competition that these authors imagine.

Gomberg’s spelled-out objection is that the distinction that these authors make between “circumstances” and “effort” (or, for Dworkin, resources and preferences) is indefensible. G. A. Cohen (1989), who critiques Dworkin’s placing the “cut” between preferences and resources, nevertheless believes there is an ethically defensible cut, between those aspects of a person’s situation for which he or she is or is not, rightly, to be held responsible. Gomberg argues for hard determinism, saying that the typologies that Roemer uses are too broad, and that what Roemer ascribes to differential effort within types should be ascribed to differential circumstances, which may be too difficult to perceive. Here, he seems to be holding an incompatibilist view (although the word is never used), that because hard determinism is true, it follows that no conception of personal responsibility can count in a theory of justice. It should be said that
Roemer and Cohen take, as a special case of the theory, the case that people not be held responsible for anything, when equality of opportunity would reduce to equality of outcomes. These authors remain agnostic about the facts of responsibility. Gomberg’s incompatibilist view evidently endorses the truth of this special case.

However, Gomberg argues that it is useful to hold people (children, in particular) responsible for their actions, as a method of training them to have good habits and morality: but to import this instrumental use of responsibility into a theory of justice is “moralizing politics” in an unacceptable way.

Dworkin’s theory (and the theories of the authors whose work derived from his) is individualist, and it has a “moneyed” conception of justice: that justice consists in allocating scarce resources (money being the currency) in a fair way. It is, in addition, a competitive theory, depending as it does on market logic. (Dworkin’s auction and his insurance-market thought experiment both use markets in a fundamental way.) As long as the end of justice is conceived of as the distribution of scarce resources through a market mechanism, there must be losers, Gomberg says, because markets push inexorably towards rewarding scarce talents, implementing a highly stratified division of labor, and disvaluing the labor of those who do not produce commodities.

There are two reasons that these moneyed conceptions of justice cannot be right: first, some people inevitably end up being losers, and second, money is not the fundamental good in life. What makes a life good, according to Gomberg, is for a person: (1) to develop and practice complex abilities, (2) to contribute to the benefit of others, and (3) to think well of him or herself and to be well thought of by others (p. 61). The major problem with market economies is their implementation of a social division of labor in which some perform only routine, menial tasks, and others perform complex labor: for those relegated to doing the former, self-esteem is largely inaccessible. This is, admittedly, a perfectionist view: but Gomberg argues that moneyed conceptions of the good are also perfectionist, in elevating material consumption above self-esteem and social contribution, or, at least, in implying that the only path to self-esteem is material accomplishment.

Associated with this social division of labor is an educational system in which a large fraction of the population is trained only to do routine tasks, to accept orders, and not to question authority more generally. In the United States, the brunt has been borne historically by African–Americans. But Gomberg, who argues passionately against racism, generalizes the meaning of the word to apply to the systematic training of any group for the purposes of performing only routine labor, thereby separating them from the means to acquire self-esteem and social respect.

There is a psychological premise in Gomberg’s theory, that people require, for their fulfillment, the practice of complex labor—the opportunity to develop their talents and to contribute to society in this way. This is an empirical question, and I am deeply sympathetic with Gomberg’s conjecture. (As such, it is puzzling that he never takes issue with Van Parijs (1995), who enunciates quite the opposite view—that it is perfectly all right, from the social viewpoint, for some to be “surfers,” where surfing is the epitome of selfish, non contributory activity.) Gomberg’s strong objection to the possibility of using markets in a just society is based upon two premises—one this one, and the premise that markets can never organize work so that everyone performs complex labor for part of the time.