The idea of equal opportunity has many supporters. This is no doubt due in large part to the fact that widely diverging interpretations of equal opportunity can be defended, ranging from some that can be described as anti-egalitarian—such as the ideal of an open competition for jobs and educational opportunities, which its attackers dub as a defence of the opportunity to be unequal—to the so-called ‘luck egalitarian’ view that equal opportunity is realized only if all have an equal chance to be equally well-off if they behave in comparably responsible ways. These and other interpretations of equal opportunity differ crucially along two dimensions, regarding, first, what one should have for equal opportunity to obtain (is it just jobs and educational places, or also other desirable goods, or well-being more generally?); and second, what counts as an obstacle to obtaining that thing in the relevant sense (do only legal barriers, or also inequalities in social circumstances, or also unequal natural endowments, hinder equality of opportunity?).

Andrew Mason’s _Levelling the Playing Field_ does much to shed light on the idea of equal opportunity both by way of exposing and exploring the diversity of interpretations of this idea, and by arguing that both ‘extreme’ interpretations of equality of opportunity (the simple view and the ‘luck egalitarian’ view mentioned above) are indefensible. In chapter 1 of his book, Mason argues that the simple view is, at best, incomplete, in that in order to be plausible it needs, among other things, an independent account of how access to the qualifications that are needed to take part in the competition should be regulated: a defensible meritocratic ideal, Mason points out, requires both that jobs and educational opportunities be allocated through an open competition designed to select the best candidate, and that access to the relevant qualifications be fair. After examining, in chapter 2, the normative bases for the first requirement of the meritocratic ideal—that a competition should aim to select the best candidate—, and the question, in chapter 3, of what conditions have to be in place for access to the relevant qualifications to be fair (through an examination of John Rawls’s account of equality of opportunity), Mason concludes that an attractive ideal of equality of opportunity will be a radical one that views the influence of both unequal social and natural circumstances as comparable threats to equality of opportunity.

However, this conclusion should not lead us to embrace the luck egalitarian view of equal opportunity, which Mason attacks in chapter 4. That view, as mentioned, holds that equality of opportunity is realized when all have an equal chance to be equally well-off if they behave in a comparably responsible manner: all inequalities that result from unequal brute luck—events which individuals are not responsible for—should, at least other things being equal, be eliminated (hence Mason’s label for this view, ‘the elimination approach’). Mason’s main criticism of the elimination approach is that it implies something which he deems implausible, namely that parents have at least a _pro tanto_ reason of justice to abstain from engaging in various activities, such as reading to their children and helping them with their homework, since doing so advantages them over other children whose parents do not help them in these ways, thereby creating inequalities which are traceable to unequal brute luck.
Mason's attack of the elimination approach is one of the key original claims Mason's book makes. And Mason's point in support of it—that parents do not even have a *pro tanto* reason to abstain from engaging in valuable relations with their children that advantage them—will strike many people as intuitively right. But on further thought it is not so clear that this point is defensible. For notice that Mason's position has what is arguably an even more implausible implication than the one he rejects. On Mason's view, we cannot say that, if parents could engage in the same valuable relationships *without* this having the effect of advantaging their children, they should do so, and that there is a reason to prefer that state of affairs, in the name of justice, over the inequality-creating one. Yet if we could bring about a state of affairs in which all rather than just some children's parents engage in those valuable relationships, or one in which we could decouple some parents' having those relationships from the relative advantages that they give their children (through a targeted education system, for example), it seems that justice requires us to bring about that state of affairs. Insofar as we want to accommodate this conviction, we should uphold, *pace* Mason, that parents do have a *pro tanto* reason not to engage in certain activities with their children—which reason is defeated, however, by their having an agent-centred prerogative to engage in relationships which, under non-ideal conditions, happen to advantage them.

By contrast with the luck egalitarian view, the idea of equality of opportunity Mason defends does not view all brute luck inequalities as unjust: its positive commitment is only that of mitigating the undue effects of both social and natural circumstances on people's access to advantage. What this view (which Mason calls 'the mitigating approach') requires, more specifically, is the subject of most of the second half of the book (chapters 5–8). Mason teases out the idea of what, according to him, counts as 'undue effect' on people's access to advantage roughly as follows: inequalities have undue effect when they violate a plurality of quasi-egalitarian and sufficiency principles. Sufficiency principles identify a certain threshold of advantage to which justice requires that individuals must be brought; quasi-egalitarian principles bring comparative considerations about people's different situations into play in judging a situation as unjust; but, unlike standard egalitarian ones, they do not view all inequalities along the dimension in question as unjust (chapter 5). The specific sufficiency and quasi-egalitarian principles Mason favours are then worked out through a 'bottom-up approach', by asking what inequalities strike us as objectionable when thinking about various concrete contexts, such as access to qualifications, gifts and bequests, and the effect of differences in natural circumstances (chapter 6). For example, according to Mason, when we ask what fair access to qualifications demands, we come to the view that it requires that all children, regardless of their natural abilities, should be provided with the education that enables them to acquire the skills necessary to have an adequate range of options (a 'basic skills principle', p. 135); that inequalities in people's social circumstances, such as their family's ability and willingness to help them, should not have the effect of making it possible for some but not others with the same qualifications to have access to educational opportunities (as would happen, for example, if we allowed a privately funded university system, so that only those children who enjoy their family's financial support could access university, despite their high school grades being the same as other children's who are barred this option), and so on.

The formulation of the demands of the mitigation approach is another of the key contributions of the book but leaves many crucial questions unaddressed. Central here, in terms of novelty of argument, is the idea that there are quasi-egalitarian principles that are