

## Is Equality (or Priority) Intrinsically Valuable?

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Many philosophers consider themselves to be egalitarians, and many others regard themselves as prioritarrians. For the purposes of this paper, I am going to define prioritarianism and distributional egalitarianism in terms of claims about how enhancements in well-being ought to be distributed, but egalitarians and prioritarrians are not of course concerned only with *increases* in welfare, and they need not be welfarists. Many distributional egalitarians would criticize the simple statement of egalitarianism upon which I will rely. But the arguments I make concerning the value of equality and the value of prioritizing the claims of those who are worse off do not depend on my taking egalitarians as focusing on the distribution of welfare rather than something else or on the narrowness or exaggerated simplicity of the statements of egalitarianism and prioritarianism.

What I mean by a distributional egalitarian is someone who attaches intrinsic value to the more equal distribution of benefits and burdens. Those who are concerned about inequalities in rights or respect are not thereby distributional egalitarians. Philosophers such as Elizabeth Anderson (1999) and Samuel Scheffler (2003) are not necessarily distributional egalitarians. Their version of egalitarianism, which I call “relational egalitarianism,” unlike prioritarianism and distributional egalitarianism, is concerned with respect and avoiding the domination of some people by others and only indirectly with the distribution of goods and welfare. I shall postpone commenting on non-distributional variants of egalitarianism until the last section of this paper

and until then when I speak of egalitarianism, I shall be referring to distributional egalitarianism, most of which can be described, in Elizabeth Anderson's terminology as luck egalitarianism.

## **1 Distributional egalitarianism**

Following Parfit, I shall take egalitarianism as endorsing what he calls "the principle of equality." Parfit states the principle of equality as follows:

*The Principle of Equality:* It is in itself bad if some people are worse off than others  
(Parfit 1991, p. 4).

One can restate this as a principle governing changes that enhance well-being, which makes it easier to compare to prioritarianism. I call this "the limited egalitarian principle."

*The limited egalitarian principle.* Enhancing well-being is in itself better the more one lessens inequalities in well-being.

I call this principle "limited" because (merely for expositional simplicity) it only addresses increases in well-being. "Bad" and "better" should be understood as appraisals from a moral as opposed to a prudential or aesthetic perspective. The "in itself" means two things. First, it implies that there is something bad about inequality (or better about lesser inequality) apart from its consequences. In other words, the principle of equality asserts that inequality is intrinsically bad, and the limited egalitarian principle maintains that enhancing welfare is intrinsically better the more it lessens inequalities. Second, in speaking of inequality as bad *in itself*, the principle of equality leaves open the possibility that a state of affairs with greater inequalities but also more welfare (or other significant moral advantages) is better, all things considered, than a more egalitarian distribution with less well-being. The principle of equality is thus not committed to the view that it is, all things considered, a good thing to lessen inequality by diminishing the well-being of those who are better off. The principle of equality does not imply that "leveling

down” is, all things considered, ever a good thing. But it does maintain that there is always one regard in which leveling down is good.

The limited egalitarian principle avoids the issue of leveling down altogether by considering only enhancements in well-being. Limiting the statement of egalitarianism in this way does not of course address any of the objections that may be made of the implications of more general statements of egalitarianism for leveling down.

Although Larry Temkin may come to mind as someone who endorses the principle of equality, in fact, he insists that inequalities are bad only if they are *undeserved*. It is not, in his view, a good thing in one regard if those who do not deserve to be doing well are as well off as the deserving, and a bad thing in another way. On the contrary, in Temkin’s view, there is nothing good about a mismatch between desert and distribution. He denies that inequality is always bad in itself and thus implicitly denies that equality always has intrinsic value. What has intrinsic value is matching the distribution of welfare to what people deserve (Kagan 1999; Olsaretti 2002).

Luck egalitarians such as Ronald Dworkin (1981), Dick Arneson (1989, 1990), Jerry Cohen (1989, 1993), and Shlomi (2010) also qualify the principle of equality. In their view, inequalities *for which people are not responsible* are bad in themselves – that is, intrinsically, rather than because of their consequences, and *prima facie*, rather than all things considered. Luck egalitarians offer differing analyses of responsibility, but none of these identifies responsibility with desert. Whether I am responsible for an outcome of a voluntary action, unlike whether I deserve that outcome, does not depend upon the moral worth of my character or action. Although it makes sense to consider whether welfare is apportioned according to desert, it does not make sense to consider whether welfare is apportioned according to responsibility. The

inequalities luck egalitarians are concerned with are those for which individuals are not responsible, and, unlike Larry, they are committed to the intrinsic value of equality.

The luck egalitarian would insist that one restate what I called the limited principle of egalitarianism as, “Enhancing well-being is in itself better the more one lessens inequalities in well-being *for which individuals are not responsible*.” Since I am not concerned in this paper about responsibility, I shall leave the qualification implicit. The luck egalitarian can suppose that I am discussing only those inequalities for which individuals are not responsible.

As already noted, many philosophers have found luck egalitarianism attractive. The reason seems to be that they are attracted to something like the principle of equality while at the same time committed to the view that when individuals are responsible for their own fates, redistribution to lessen inequalities is unjust or at least requires some other justification than the intrinsic value of equality. But saying this much leaves a great deal to be explained, including especially, what it is that makes equality good. If two people have a pleasant day hiking and the happier of the two is lucky enough to catch a glimpse of a graceful soaring eagle, then the outcome is worse than if the unhappy hiker had seen the eagle, regardless of any consequences of the inequality for total well-being. Why? What is bad about the inequality? What could make inequality *intrinsically* bad? Temkin says that what is bad about inequality is that the distribution is “comparatively unfair.”<sup>1</sup> If what it means for a distribution to be comparatively unfair is that it is unequal, then we haven’t made much progress. If instead one takes comparative unfairness to

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<sup>1</sup> “Specifically, concern about equality is a portion of our concern about fairness that focuses on how people fare relative to others. So, our concern for equality is not separable from our concern for a certain aspect of fairness; they are part and parcel of a single concern.

Egalitarians generally believe that it is bad for some to be worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own. This is because, typically, if one person is worse off than another through no fault or choice of her own, the situation seems comparatively unfair, and, hence, the inequality will be objectionable. . . .

In fact, I think that deserved inequalities, if there are any, are not bad at all. The reason for this is simple. Undeserved inequality is unfair, but *deserved* inequality is not" (Temkin 2003, p. 767).

be a mismatch between reward and desert, then the reference to comparative unfairness is far from empty, but it does not explain why inequality is in itself bad.

## **2 Prioritarianism**

Before considering further what might make inequality intrinsically bad, let us turn to prioritarianism, which does not endorse the principle of equality. So the prioritarian obviously avoids the need to explain what is bad about inequality in itself. Yet, at the same time, prioritarians will generally favor the same policies and outcomes that egalitarians do. Parfit states what he calls “the priority view” as follows:

*The Priority View:* Benefitting people matters more the worse off these people are (1991, p. 19).

In maintaining that benefitting those who are worse off “matters more,” Parfit leaves open both an interpretation of the priority view as offering an evaluation of changes in distributions of well-being and an interpretation with respect to what ought to be done. I shall discuss only the first interpretation, which takes the priority view to evaluate changes in distributions. To facilitate the comparison with egalitarianism, I shall restate the priority view as follows:

*The limited prioritarian principle.* Enhancing well-being is in itself better the worse off are those whom one benefits.

Those who are concerned about responsibility can qualify this by distinguishing whether people bear responsibility for how well or badly off they are, but as in the case of egalitarianism, I shall leave this qualification implicit. The limited prioritarian principle, unlike the limited egalitarian principle, is not explicitly concerned with the pattern or relations among the well-being of individuals. To determine how much moral weight to place on providing a benefit to an individual, one considers how well off or badly off the individual is. Although those who are

worse off absolutely will be worse off relative to others, the priority of their claims depends on their absolute level of well-being, not on how their well-being compares to other possible recipients of the good. The worse off the individual is, the more moral value is attached to benefitting him or her. The limited prioritarian agrees that it is worse if the happy hiker sees the eagle than if the unhappy hiker sees it, because it is better if benefits go to those who are worse off. What matters is, however, not the extent of inequality, but whether benefits go to those whose claim on those benefits is stronger. Rather than defending the intrinsic value of equality, the prioritarian places an intrinsic moral weight, which depends on how well-off individuals are, on people's claims to benefits or on the moral worth of providing a benefit to them. The justification for this purported intrinsic moral weight is just as mysterious as the justification for the purported intrinsic moral value of equality.

The egalitarian principles says nothing about how much weight to place on equality, as compared to increasing total well-being, and prioritarianism says nothing about how much priority to give to those who are worse off. These are not a minor omissions. If the weight placed on equality or the priority given to those who are worse off is small, then welfarist prioritarians and egalitarians may differ little from utilitarians. Furthermore, one wonders how it is possible to defend the view that equality is intrinsically valuable or that, regardless of consequences, it is better to enhance the well-being of those who are worse off without saying anything about how valuable equality is or how much priority goes to the worse off. Yet neither doctrine contains or, as far as I can tell, even suggests any principled way to decide on these weights. Egalitarians and prioritarians seem to assume that one looks at examples and picks weights that conform to one's intuitive reactions. I know of no account of the principles that should be invoked to resolve disagreements.

As stated by Parfit or as restated here for the purposes of comparison, egalitarianism and prioritarianism make claims that are (paradoxically) extremely ambitious and at the same time remarkably vague. The egalitarian maintains that, apart from the consequences for overall well-being, for the well-being of those who are suffering, for self-respect, for liberty or rights, or for the extent to which some people dominate others, the distribution of well-being across individuals has an unspecified moral importance. Such a position needs a serious defense. The prioritarian is not in an easier position. The claims to increased well-being of those who are worse off are supposed to have some unspecified greater weight, apart from the consequences for relations among individuals within any society, regardless of the effects on overall well-being, on suffering, on self-respect, or on liberty or rights. Why accept this strange claim? Why should anyone defend either of these views?

### **3 Intuitive arguments for egalitarianism and prioritarianism**

The only arguments I can detect for the view that equality is in itself good and inequality bad or for prioritizing the claims of those who are worse off consist of appeals to intuitions. Even a superficial glance at the world around us, by anyone of good will who has not been hardened by some ideology or corrupted by greed, is enough to provoke revulsion at present-day inequalities. The unfairness of a world where millions are malnourished and life expectancies in some countries are under 40, while fewer than 100 individuals have a net worth greater than half of the population of the world, is palpable. What could be more obvious than that inequality is bad, or that it is better from a moral perspective to improve the well-being of someone who is badly off than to increase the well-being of someone who is better off?

A serious problem with intuitive arguments in support of egalitarianism or prioritarianism is that other moral theories besides egalitarianism and prioritarianism also condemn the

grotesque inequalities of the modern world. If several scientific theories all make the same prediction P, then the fact that a particular theory makes prediction P does not give us reason to favor that theory over the others that also predict P. Similarly, the fact that egalitarianism implies that contemporary inequalities are morally unacceptable does not give us reason to accept egalitarianism if there are other moral views that also imply that contemporary inequalities are morally unacceptable. And there are other moral positions that condemn current inequalities just as clearly and forcefully as egalitarianism. Not only is there prioritarianism, but compassion for those who are suffering, utilitarianism or even some versions of libertarianism also condemn current inequalities.

Among competing theories whose predictions agree, scientists may reasonably favor theories that account for data simply and cleanly rather than by means of apparently *ad hoc* auxiliary assumptions. Even though competing theories (coupled with auxiliary hypotheses need to bring the theory to bear) all imply the same prediction, that prediction can favor one theory over another. The fact that when the superior planets (Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) are opposite the sun, they are brightest and show “retrograde motion” follows, given Kepler’s astronomy, from the claim that their orbits are outside the earth. On the other hand, Ptolemaic astronomy can account for the phenomena only by attributing epicycles to the orbits of these planets with diameters and speeds of revolution that have no rationale apart from enabling the model to fit the data. If one could make an analogous case for the greater simplicity or directness with which egalitarianism condemns current inequalities compared to the alternatives, then the congruence between egalitarianism and the condemnation of current inequalities would support egalitarianism. But the prioritarian, utilitarian, libertarian, or compassion-based cases against current inequalities are not at all *ad hoc*.



The intuitive argument in defense of the intrinsic value of equality is not as hopeless as it appears, because the egalitarian can argue, quite reasonably, that even though utilitarianism or certain varieties of libertarianism account for our moral condemnation of contemporary inequalities, they have other implications that appear to be morally unacceptable. Although compassion-based condemnation of avoidable suffering may not have similar problems, the condemnation of suffering does not possess the sort of generality that egalitarianism possesses. So, *if* the egalitarian can make the case that taking equality to have intrinsic value does not have *other* apparently mistaken implications, it may outperform the alternatives.

But does egalitarianism outperform the alternatives? Defenders of prioritarianism deny this. Prioritarians argue that their view is superior to egalitarianism on the grounds that it denies that leveling down is in any respect good. Even though egalitarians need not *ever* favor leveling down, they are committed to the view that leveling down is in one respect good (Parfit 1991, pp. 17-18, 23).

Unlike Parfit and many others, I don't think this is a strong argument, and indeed it seems to me that the egalitarian could turn around and use it against the prioritarian. As I see the dialectical state of play, those to whom it is intuitively obvious that the distribution of well-being (or whatever other currency the egalitarian is concerned with) is not itself morally significant, will reject the egalitarian's view that leveling down is in one regard a good thing. At the same time, those to whom it is intuitively obvious that the distribution of well-being (or whatever else matters) is morally significant, will find reason to reject prioritarianism on the grounds that it denies that leveling down is in any regard a good thing. I personally do not see the intuitive appeal of taking equality to have intrinsic value and so do not regard leveling down as in any regard good in those (unusual) circumstances in which it has no other effect other than to lower some people's well-being and to reduce inequality. On the other hand, I also do not see the

intuitive appeal of prioritarianism and do not see much support for it in the fact that it denies that leveling down is in any regard good.

A convincing intuitive case for egalitarianism or prioritarianism would be one where egalitarianism (or prioritarianism) implies a secure considered moral judgment that competing moral views do not imply without *ad hoc* additions. I do not think that such a case can be made for either egalitarianism or for prioritarianism. Since the weights assigned to equality and to the claims of those who are worse off are unspecified, any evaluative comparison between two distributions that the egalitarian makes, the prioritarian can make, too, by adjusting the priorities properly. Such an adjustment might appear to be *ad hoc*, but a similar complaint can be made about the egalitarian who needs to decide how to compare the inequalities in different distributions and how much weight to put on those inequalities.

Consider an example where the judgment of an egalitarian and of a prioritarian might come apart: Suppose there are four individuals or social classes and one is comparing the following two distributions of utilities among the individuals or classes:

A: <2, 4, 4, 6>                      B: <3,3,3,7>.

Total utility is the same, so the judgment of the egalitarian should depend entirely on the measure of equality. If the egalitarian measures inequality via the Gini Coefficient, the inequality in the two distributions is just the same. If the egalitarian measures inequality by variance, then B is slightly more unequal than A. The prioritarian will rank A as at least as good as B if and only if  $2w_1 + 4w_2 + 4w_3 + 6w_4 > 3w_1 + 3w_2 + 3w_3 + 7w_4$ . So A is better than B if and only if  $w_2 + w_3 > w_1 + w_4$  where, by assumption,  $w_1 > w_2 > w_3 > w_4$ . For some priority weights A will be better than B; for some worse; and for others the two will be equal. I have no clear intuitions concerning whether A or B is better; but there's enough flexibility in both egalitarianism and prioritarianism that my intuitions are never going to provide a strong

argument favoring one over the other. I cannot speak for others, but I confess to some chagrin at their purported abilities to make reliable intuitive distinctions among abstract and unfamiliar cases.

To make an intuitive case on behalf of prioritarianism, one needs is an example that is uncontaminated by other moral considerations, where the only morally relevant fact is that one individual is worse off than another. Consider:

*The Case of Anne and Abby.* Anne and Abby have no prior claims to an indivisible good such as an inoculation against polio that can only be given to one of them. Both have very good lives, but Anne is worse off than Abby, and if Anne were to receive this good, she would still be worse off than Abby. This good provides exactly the same benefit to Anne as to Abby. Anne and Abby live in different countries and whether Anne or Abby receives the good has no consequences for their relations to one another. Neither knows anything of the other, including whether the other receives the good. Anne's getting the good has exactly the same effect on inequalities in Anne's country that Abby's getting the good has on inequalities within Abby's country, and there are no other morally relevant differences in the consequences of benefitting Anne or Abby. The only difference is that Anne is, in absolute terms, worse off than Abby. Perhaps Anne has a three-room apartment, while Abby has four rooms and a somewhat larger inheritance.

The prioritarian says that it is a morally better outcome if Anne gets the inoculation than if Abby gets it. The egalitarian might agree, since equality in the total population of humans is greater if Anne gets the good. If, on the other hand, the egalitarian is concerned with the distribution of well-being among individuals who bear some relationship to one another, however distant, then the egalitarian will not care who gets the good. Even if the case does not help us to decide between egalitarianism and prioritarianism, it does show a difference between

the implications of prioritarianism and possibly egalitarianism on one side, and the alternative views that condemn actual real-world inequalities. Although this is the sort of case to which the prioritarian needs to refer in order to make the case that our intuitions support prioritarianism, it seems to me that once one has cleared away all the factors that invoke other moral considerations, the intuition that the worse off individual should receive the benefit grows tenuous. If you agree with me that there is not much to be said for giving the good to Anne as opposed to just flipping a coin, then you should share my skepticism about the intuitive case for prioritarianism.

#### **4 Brock's arguments in defense of prioritarianism**

I know of only one attempt to say more in defense of prioritarianism than merely invoking ambiguous intuitions. In a recent essay concerned with health-care prioritization, Dan Brock makes three arguments in defense of prioritarianism. First, he points out that “the worse off that persons are, the greater the relative improvement a given-size benefit will provide them, and so the more the benefit may matter to them” (2012, p. 158). Brock's observation is correct, but why does the fact that giving some benefit to an individual constitutes a greater relative improvement constitute a reason to prefer giving the benefit to that person? One answer is that equal health benefits are not equal welfare benefits. A given health improvement (measured in terms other than its impact on well-being) might make a larger contribution to well-being among those in poorer health, in whom it constitutes a larger proportional health improvement. In that case, favoring health improvements for those in worse health is just like the utilitarian case in favor of redistributing income from the rich to the poor on the grounds of the greater marginal utility of income to the poor. The reason to favor benefitting the worse off is that doing so provides a larger benefit, not that the worse off have stronger claims to an identical benefit. If, on the other hand, a health improvement of a certain size makes the same contribution to well-being

regardless of how large a proportional increase it is, then what is the moral significance of proportional improvement? Without an answer to this question, the proportional difference in equal health benefits does not support prioritarianism.

Brock states his second argument in defense of prioritarianism as follows:

A different line of justification for the priority view focuses on the different strength of claims generated by the different degrees of undeserved deprivation A and B suffer . . . . Because worse-off A's undeserved deprivation is much greater, he has a greater complaint and so a stronger moral claim than B that his deprivation be reduced or eliminated. . . . If we improve the position of the worst off as much as possible we minimize the complaint they have based on their disadvantage. (2012, pp. 158-9)

Brock's argument appears to have the following form:

- (1) Those who are undeservedly worse off have a stronger moral complaint than those who are better off
- (2) Addressing stronger complaints should have priority over addressing weaker complaints.
- (3) Benefitting people addresses their complaints.
- (4) Thus benefitting those who are undeservedly worse off should have priority over benefitting those who are better off.

Let us grant the second and third premises. That leaves the first premise, which I question. Those who are undeservedly worse off have not necessarily been *wronged*, and if they have not been wronged, then it is questionable whether they have any moral *complaint*. For example, suppose a tree falls on two members of a group of hikers,<sup>2</sup> breaking Jack's right leg and Jill's left leg and

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<sup>2</sup> Larry Temkin takes a tree's falling on one individual rather than another as an example of "comparative unfairness" (2003, pp. 772-3). I disagree.

also severely damaging Jill's hearing. Jack and Jill are both unfortunate and undeservedly worse off than the other hikers. Neither has, however, been *wronged* or has suffered any injustice that requires redress. Jill has no complaint that that justifies placing greater weight on fixing her broken leg over fixing Jack's broken leg. There is no argument here for the conclusion that Jill's hearing loss constitutes a reason to fix her broken leg before fixing Jack's leg.

Brock's third argument for prioritarianism avoids the problem I have pointed out with his second argument. He writes,

A similar view can be put in terms of needs, and it has a special resonance in the context of health care. Many people believe that the basic or most urgent needs, either general needs or health care needs in particular, of all should be met before meeting the less urgent needs or wants of any. . . . This is a prioritarian view in the context of health care, though it too may be too strong in giving absolute priority to the most urgent needs. (2012, p. 159)

The argument seems to be the following:

- (1) Those who are worse off (at least with respect to health) have greater needs.
- (2) The greater a need, the stronger its moral claim to be met.
- (3) The needs of those who are worse off (at least with respect to health) have a stronger claim to be met than the needs of those who are better off.

Unlike the assertion that those who are worse off have greater moral complaints, the first premise is plausible. But the support that the second premise apparently lends to prioritarianism is illusory. Satisfying a greater need typically provides a greater benefit. Someone who needs life-saving treatment not only has a greater need than someone who needs a splint for a broken ankle, but because the need for life-saving is greater, satisfying that need provides a larger benefit. Would the fact that *A* needs something more than *B* justify giving it to *A*, if the benefit to

$A$  were no greater than the benefit to  $B$  – if indeed this were possible? To prioritize the satisfaction of greater needs when the benefit of satisfying them is no larger than the benefit provided by satisfying lesser needs seems to presuppose the prioritarian commitments that this argument aims to justify.

So we're back to intuition, which does little to justify either the intrinsically greater importance of satisfying the claims of those who are worse off or the intrinsic goodness of equality.

## **5 What if distributional equality has only instrumental value?**

Many egalitarians apparently believe that egalitarianism stands or falls with the non-instrumental value of equality. That certainly seems to be the tenor of some of Larry's writings, and in a prescient essay, David Miller questions whether the search for some non-instrumental value for distributional equality is critical to the egalitarian enterprise.<sup>3</sup> But, as Miller points out, the equality that has non-instrumental value need not be an equality in goods. It can instead be an equality in respect and status.

Like Miller and others, I think that egalitarians should take a step back and reconsider their view that egalitarianism fails unless distributional equality has some intrinsic value. Just as libertarians can take freedom to be the central political value while at the same time maintaining that its value is entirely instrumental, so egalitarians can take distributional inequalities to be among the greatest of social ills while maintaining that the harms of inequalities lie entirely in certain of their consequences. Egalitarians such as Miller (1982), Walzer (1983), Scanlon (2003),

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<sup>3</sup> Why should *equality* be thought desirable? Equality after all means a leveling of differences; . . . to treat people in such a way would be at best perverse and at worst immoral. The pursuit of equality seems to be impaled on a fork: either the ultimate end of the pursuit is not equality at all but some other value or values which have become confused in the popular mind with equality, or our societies are aiming at a goal that cursory inspection reveals to be quite monstrous. (1982, p. 73)

O'Neill (2008), Waldren and myself (2011) have argued that egalitarians should deny that equality is valuable in itself. Yet, in our view, the value of equality does not lie in its promotion of any old valuable end. Equality in the distribution of goods serves distinctive valuable ends such as impartiality, equality of respect, solidarity, and non-subjugation to which egalitarians have a special attachment.

Rather than defining egalitarianism by whether one takes distributional equality to have intrinsic value, what makes one an egalitarian on the view I favor are a variety of values, including crucially, a strong commitment to equality of respect and of "status" and (in circumstances such as ours) a belief that to promote these values requires drastically diminishing distributional inequalities. The view that an individual's claims to benefits should be weighted by how badly off the individual is finds its shaky justification as a method of implementing policies devoted to promoting the same ultimate values that distributional egalitarianism promotes.

What are the values that prioritarianism and distributional egalitarianism promote if, as I have suggested, there is no case to be made that the claims of those who are worse off are for that reason greater or that there is some non-instrumental value in a more rather than less equal distribution of welfare? Following Scheffler, Anderson, Miller, Scanlon, and O'Neill, I think that there are several:

1. *Fairness*. Inequalities in opportunities or in the distribution of benefits and burdens are often the result of unfair actions, institutions, and social processes, and lessening them is require to restore fairness. Although the connection between unfair circumstances and unequal distribution is contingent, it is robust.



2. *Impartiality and legitimacy.* Inequalities in wealth and political power may undermine the legitimacy of courts and elections and degrade institutions that provide public education, health care or even personal security.
3. *Self-respect.* Inequalities in valued possessions, life prospects, political influence and social status threaten self-respect. They encourage servility and undue deference to those who have a favored status on the one side and arrogant presumption on the other.
4. *Equal respect.* Inequalities in life prospects, opportunity, political influence and social status stigmatize people and treat some people as of greater intrinsic worth than others. The duty to show equal respect is linked to a basic element in morality, which is the recognition of people's moral standing – their authority "to make claims and demands of one another as equal free and rational agents" (Darwall 2004, p. 43).
5. *Solidarity.* Inequalities in crucial resources, in status and in socially valued possessions create barriers to friendship, community, and love.
6. *Non-subjugation.* Inequalities in political power, crucial resources or life prospects, may subjugate some people to others. Those who possess vital resources can dominate those without them.

Although many who are not egalitarians share these six objectives – to avoid unfairness, to protect impartiality, to sustain self-respect, to show equal respect, to nurture fraternity, and to prevent domination – non-egalitarians will place less weight on these objectives and will be more concerned with welfare, freedom, or specific rights than are egalitarians. Although egalitarians are also concerned with welfare and freedom, they weight the six objectives listed above more heavily. In my view, these objectives lie at the heart of egalitarianism and ground the attractions of prioritarianism. Although utilitarians or even some libertarians might join in condemning

distributional inequalities because of their consequences for total welfare or because they are undermining liberty, what makes someone an egalitarian is caring about these objectives.

This list of egalitarian objectives is not original, drawing as it does explicitly from Miller and Scanlon. It resembles O'Neill's "non-intrinsic egalitarianism" (2008), which assembles similar components. Drawing also from Scanlon (although not from Miller), O'Neill maintains that non-intrinsic egalitarians are concerned about six things: (a) suffering and deprivation, (b) stigmatizing differences in status, (c) domination, (d) weakening self-respect, (e) servility, and (f) undermining fraternity (2008, pp. 121-23). Setting aside suffering (a) as not necessarily an egalitarian concern, O'Neill argues that concerns about the badness of (b) – (f) are distinctively egalitarian (2008, p. 130). The view defended here differs mainly in that I think that egalitarianism consists of a family of positions which differ in the weight they place on the different egalitarian considerations and, consequently, in the kinds of inequalities that they focus on, while O'Neill takes the concerns that he identifies as motivating egalitarians to form a unified package. The egalitarian ideal is a state of affairs characterized by self-respect and fraternity and free of domination, servility, and stigmatizing differences in status. What links such a state of affairs to equality is "a deep social fact that we can realize the values embedded in the egalitarian considerations (b)–(f) only where substantial inequalities of condition have been eliminated" (2008, p. 131).

Although there are affinities among the separate concerns that drive egalitarians, there are no entailments among them. Egalitarians can buy the whole package as O'Neill urges, but I suggest that they do not need to. Some egalitarians might be driven mainly by a concern with fraternity, while other egalitarians might be concerned mainly about avoiding domination, with little interest in fraternity. Although an egalitarian may accept O'Neill's ideal and be deeply concerned with all of the factors O'Neill lists, someone with an overriding concern to avoid

oppression also counts as an egalitarian, even if she has little concern about servility. Once one recognizes that egalitarians have a multiplicity of objectives, one should recognize that there can be a multiplicity of egalitarian positions.

If this account of why equality matters is correct, then egalitarians have a distinctive concern about inequalities in the following five categories of goods:<sup>4</sup>

1. *Crucial resources and life prospects* – especially to show equal respect, and to sustain self-respect and because these are so often result from past injustices.
2. *Social status* – especially to protect equal respect and avoid stigmatization, to sustain self-respect and avoid servility and to foster fraternity.
3. *Socially provided benefits, burdens and opportunities* – especially to avoid unfairness and to show equal respect.
4. *Socially valued possessions, including in particular wealth* – especially to avoid undermining self-respect and fraternity, to protect the impartiality of social institutions, and to avoid subjugation.
5. *Political influence* – especially to protect the impartiality of social institutions, to show equal respect, to protect self-respect, and to avoid subjugation.

These five categories of goods span the dimensions within which inequalities are of greater or lesser importance to different egalitarians. Egalitarians are concerned with inequalities with respect to the goods that are relevant to their moral concerns – the goods that bear significantly on life prospects, social status, socially provided benefits, burdens and opportunities, socially valued possessions, or political influence. *But what matters is not some overall measure*

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<sup>4</sup> Egalitarians, like most of those who are not egalitarians, also, of course, object to inequalities in rights.

*of inequalities among these goods*. What matters are the six considerations mentioned above: fairness, impartiality, self-respect, showing equal respect, fraternity, and avoiding domination.

A large part of the literature espousing distributional equality begins by assuming that the goal of egalitarianism is equalizing something or other which bears on well-being and that the philosophical problem is to clarify what exactly should be equalized. In my view (like Scheffler's 2003, p. 31) egalitarians have a variety of moral objectives, whose pursuit requires lessening existing inequalities. Though there is a persuasive case to be made for equality of some things such as moral standing and consequently equality of basic rights and liberties, the ultimate ends of egalitarians should be to eliminate the barriers that stand in the way of the six basic egalitarian objectives.

Caring only about fairness, impartiality, fraternity or equal respect is not enough to make one an egalitarian. There are too many ambiguities in these objectives and too many non-egalitarian reasons to be concerned about them. On the other hand, someone who is concerned that people not dominate one another but not particularly concerned with any of the other objectives would be a kind of egalitarian. There is no quantitative criterion specifying how many of which of these objectives someone must endorse to count as an egalitarian. One needs to look at the substance of the objectives someone endorses and the ideals implicit in them to determine whether the position is egalitarian or not.

Egalitarians such as Scheffler and Anderson argue that egalitarianism aims at *a society of equals* – at equality as a relationship among people. Such a society and such a relationship calls attention to all the factors O'Neill and I mention: fair and impartial treatment of individuals, non-subservience, mutual respect, and the elimination of socially controllable barriers to fraternity or self-respect. So, one might argue, egalitarians must demand the whole package. This doesn't require complete equality, because when inequalities no longer stand in the way of the six

fundamental egalitarian concerns, they are no longer objectionable. But it does require attention to each of the six egalitarian objectives and hence to inequalities in all five of the categories of advantages.

The notion of a society of equals does not, however, rule out the view that egalitarianism is a family of related positions. The ideal of a society of equals is sufficiently vague that it is compatible with a variety of different mixes of egalitarian objectives. Egalitarianism makes most sense if one allows differences in emphases and ultimate concerns. For example, Dworkin is primarily concerned, in his own words with "treating people as equals." His emphasis is accordingly on fairness, impartiality, and equal respect. Cohen is more concerned with self-respect, solidarity, and fairness. Anderson's focus is on avoiding domination. Many members of the family of egalitarian positions will be complementary, while others will conflict. In a world like ours with such enormous inequalities, egalitarians of different stripes will be in fundamental agreement on policies; and indeed beneficent non-egalitarians can readily join those pressing for greater equality. But in a world of greater equality, egalitarians would disagree about how to prioritize different inequalities and about how much equality is enough to respond to the moral concerns underlying egalitarianism.

If the inequalities that characterize societies were not so large and pervasive, the differences among egalitarians and the hollowness of the intuitive condemnation of inequality or the intuitive embrace of priority for the worse off would be more obvious. Given the grim current prospects of egalitarian projects, adjudicating among competing egalitarian positions is unlikely to be of practical importance for a long time to come. But recognizing and emphasizing the range of considerations that drive egalitarians, instead of relying on an untenable intuitive appeal to the intrinsic badness of inequality, places egalitarianism on a stronger footing.

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