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*Illuminating Egalitarianism*

Greetings and Introduction

Thank you for your kind introduction, and a special thanks to Shlomi Segall and Joe Heath for all their efforts in arranging this splendid conference.

When Shlomi first contacted me, I was involved with other projects, and noted that I wouldn’t be able to write up something new in time for this conference. Shlomi was very understanding, and kindly suggested that a contribution articulating my views about equality would be welcome in any event, even if it consisted in bringing together in a shortened lecture format some of my previously published views. I mention this, because if my claims are already familiar to some of you—please blame it on Shlomi! If they are not, well then you are obviously not keeping up with my work on equality! Seriously, this talk draws on a number of different publications that I have written after my book, *Inequality*, so I would expect at least some of my claims, formulations, and examples to be new to most of you.

My goal today is a very modest one. It is not to convince you of the *truth* of my claims, it is simply to help illuminate the nature of egalitarianism, to show what it is certain types of egalitarians are committed to, or at least *should* be committed to, and to suggest that equality *is* an important normative ideal that cannot simply be dispensed with in our moral deliberations.

Unfortunately, in giving this talk, I can only address a small fraction of the issues deserving of discussion in the time allotted. And even at that, this will be the kind of talk that most philosophers, including myself, usually abhor. It will be *long* on bald assertions, and woefully short on arguments. Still, I hope to broach an array of interesting and important topics.

A rough outline of the talk is on the handout.

Part I. Introducing Four Rivals, and Defending Egalitarianism Against Two of Them

A. Egalitarianism.

Egalitarians come in many stripes. Too many, I'm afraid. Numerous, quite distinct positions--ranging from utilitarianism, to libertarianism, to Rawls's maximin principle--have been described as--or perhaps conflated with--egalitarianism, though, of course, most of these positions have little in common.

Correspondingly, in discussing equality it is *extremely* important that one be clear about the sense one is using the term. Let me begin by distinguishing several egalitarian positions, and clarifying the sense in which I shall be using the notion of egalitarianism.

Philosophers have long distinguished between purely *formal* and *substantive* principles of equality. Unfortunately, this distinction is not especially clean or helpful. More usefully, one might distinguish between equality as *universality*, as *impartiality*, or as *comparability*.

A basic principle of rationality, equality as universality reflects the view that all reasons and principles must be universal in their application. This is the view embodied in Aristotle’s famous dictum that equality requires that likes be treated alike. Notice, since it applies universally, even the view that all blondes should be rich, and all brunettes paupers, meets this “egalitarian” principle.

Equality as impartiality reflects the view that all people must be treated impartially. Of course, positions vary dramatically regarding what *constitutes* treating people impartially. For example, for Kantians impartiality requires treating people as ends and never merely as means, while for Utilitarians it requires neutrality between different people’s interests when maximizing the good. Arguably, it is *this* conception of equality as impartiality that the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has in mind in contending that ALL plausible moral views are egalitarian, they merely differ in the answers they give to the “equality of what?” question.

While all plausible moral theories are committed to equality as universality and impartiality, equality as comparability reflects a deeper commitment to equality. Equality as comparability is fundamentally concerned with how people fare *relative to others*. This is a distinctive substantive view that rivals “non-egalitarian” positions like utilitarianism and libertarianism.

Another important distinction is between *instrumental* egalitarianism, where equality is valuable only insofar as it promotes some *other* valuable ideal, and *non-instrumental* egalitarianism, where equality is sometimes valuable *itself*, beyond the extent to which it promotes other ideals. On non-instrumental egalitarianism, any complete account of the moral realm must allow for equality’s value.

I claim that many who think of themselves as egalitarians are in fact merely instrumental egalitarians or, more accurately, instrumental egalitarians combined with equality as universality and impartiality egalitarians. This is true, for example, of many humanitarians, Rawlsians, communitarians, and so-called democratic egalitarians, who only favor redistribution from better to worse off as a way of reducing suffering, aiding the worst off, fostering solidarity, or strengthening democratic institutions. Such reasons are morally significant, and compatible with equality as universality and impartiality. But each is also compatible with the rejection of non-instrumental egalitarianism and equality as comparability.

I don’t expect you to keep these distinctions in mind, but I want to stress that in this talk, my concern is with *substantive* non-instrumental egalitarianism understood as the concern for equality as comparability.

*Equality and fairness*.

If I give one piece of candy to Andrea, and two to Rebecca, Andrea will immediately assert "unfair!" This natural reaction suggests an intimate connection between equality and fairness. Arguably, concern about equality is that portion of our concern about comparative fairness that focuses on how people fare relative to others. Specifically, concern about equality reflects the view that inequality is bad when, and because, it is unfair, where the unfairness consists in one person being worse off than another no more deserving.

Thus, I claim that people who are egalitarians in my sense are *not* motivated by ENVY but by a sense of FAIRNESS. So, on my view, concern for equality is not separable from our concern for a certain aspect of fairness; they are part and parcel of a single concern. We say that certain inequalities are objectionable *because they are unfair*; but by the same token, we say that there is a certain kind of unfairness in certain kinds of undeserved inequalities.

Many contemporary egalitarians, including Gerry Cohen, Ronald Dworkin, Dick Arneson, and myself, have been identified as so-called *luck egalitarians*. Acknowledging the importance of autonomy and personal responsibility, *luck egalitarianism* supposedly aims to rectify the influence of luck in people's lives. Correspondingly, a canonical formulation of luck egalitarianism, invoked by both Gerry Cohen and myself, is that it is bad when one person is worse off than another through no fault or choice of her own. So, luck egalitarians object when equally deserving people are unequally well off, but not when one person is worse off than another due to her own responsible choices, say to pursue a life of leisure, or crime.

In fact, I think luck egalitarianism has been misunderstood by most of its proponents—including for example, both Cohen and myself—as well as its opponents. The egalitarian’s *fundamental* concern isn’t with luck *per se*, or even with whether or not someone is worse off than another through no fault or choice of her own, it is with *comparative fairness*, but people have been confused about this because *as it happens* in most paradigmatic cases where inequality involves comparative unfairness it *also* involves luck, or someone being worse off than another through no fault or choice of her own.

Thus, on close examination, the intimate connection between equality and fairness illuminates the ultimate role that luck plays in the egalitarian’s thinking, as well as the relevance and limitations of the well-known “through no fault or choice of their own” clause.  Among *equally* deserving people, it *is* bad, because *unfair*, for some to be worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own.  But among *unequally* deserving people it isn’t bad, because not unfair, for someone less deserving to be worse off than someone more deserving, even if the former is worse off through no fault or choice of his own.  For example, egalitarians needn’t object if criminal John is worse off than law-abiding Mary, even if John *craftily* avoided capture, and so is only worse off because, through no fault or choice of his own, a falling tree limb injured him.

Additionally, in *some* cases inequality is bad, because unfair, even though the worse off *are* responsible for their plight, as when the worse off are so because they chose to do their duty, or perhaps acted supererogotorily, in adverse circumstances not of their making. So, for example, if I’m unlucky enough to walk by a drowning child, and I injure myself saving her, the egalitarian might think it *unfair* that I end up worse off than others, even though I am so as a result of my own responsible free choice to do my duty to help someone in need.

Correspondingly, on reflection, luck *itself* is neither good nor bad from the egalitarian standpoint.  Egalitarians object to luck that leaves equally deserving people unequally well off.  But they can accept luck that makes equally deserving people equally well off, or unequally deserving people unequally well off proportional to their deserts.  Thus, luck will be approved or opposed *only to the extent* that it promotes or undermines comparative fairness.

iv. Finally, let me emphasize that egalitarians are PLURALISTS. NO egalitarian believes that equality is ALL that matters. But they believe it matters *some*. It is only one important ideal, among others, including, perhaps, freedom utility, perfection, and other conceptions of justice.

B. Prioritarianism.

For many years, non-egalitarians have argued that we should reject substantive non-instrumental egalitarianism.

Instead, some believe, we should be *prioritarians*, and in fact, I believe that many who think of themselves as egalitarians actually *are* prioritarians. Roughly, prioritarians want everyone to fare as well as possible, but the worse off someone is in absolute terms, the greater weight they give to her claims in their moral deliberations. This view tends to favor redistribution between the better- and worse-off, but the key point to note is that while on this view one has a special concern for the worse-off, one's ultimate goal is for each to fare as well as possible.

Prioritarianism may seem to capture some of the strengths of utilitarianism and maximin, while avoiding their shortcomings. Like utilitarianism, it gives weight to the concerns of *all*, and hence is able to avoid maximin's *exclusive*--and implausible--focus on the worst-off. But like maximin, prioritarianism expresses a special concern for those worse-off, and hence is able to avoid utilitarianism's exclusive--and implausible--focus on maximization.

Still, prioritarianism has mainly been offered as an alternative to substantive non-instrumental egalitarianism. In particular, many think that prioritarianism is the closest thing to a plausible egalitarian position. The gist of this view is not that prioritarianism is a plausible version of non-instrumental egalitarianism, but rather that non-instrumental egalitarianism is implausible. Hence, if one generally favors transfers from better- to worse-off--as many do--one should be a prioritarian instead of a non-instrumental egalitarian.

Many are attracted to Prioritarianism by the *Raising Up* and *Levelling Down Objections*. I shall respond to the Levelling Down Objection in Part II, and present some examples intended to further illuminate the differences between egalitarianism and prioritarianism. But first let me consider two rival positions some are attracted to.

C. The Subsistence Level

Some believe that the subsistence level has a special role to play in our understanding of inequality’s importance—or lack thereof. They imagine conditions of scarcity, where there are insufficient resources to support everyone. They then note that if the resources are distributed equally, so that everyone is at the same welfare level, or has equal access to advantages, everyone will be below the subsistence level, and hence everyone will die. If, on the other hand, resources are distributed unequally, at least some, though not all, will live.

Consideration of such examples has led some people to conclude that inequality doesn’t matter, since the unequal outcome in which some people live is clearly preferable to the equal outcome in which everyone dies.[[1]](#endnote-1) Others have used such examples to support the conclusion that inequality matters less in poor societies than rich ones, as only rich societies can “afford the luxury” of equality.[[2]](#endnote-2) And similar claims might be made regarding prioritarianism.

Such arguments are popular. This is unfortunate. Undoubtedly, the unequal situation in which some people live is better than the equal situation where everyone dies *all things considered*. But this does not mean that inequality in a poor situation doesn’t matter, much less that inequality doesn’t matter at all. Rather, such arguments merely serve to remind us that inequality is not *all* that matters. But who would have thought differently?

Surely, the egalitarian would say, the worse-off people in the unequal situation have a significant complaint regarding inequality. They are much worse-off than the others through no fault or choice of their own (we are supposing). Moreover, the difference between the quality of their lives is most significant. It is a difference measured in terms of life’s basic necessities; a difference, quite literally, between who lives and dies. To suggest that such undeserved inequality doesn't *matter* is ludicrous. And to respond to such situations, as non-egalitarians are wont to, that “nobody said that life was fair,” is to admit, even in one’s cynicism, the perspective of the comparative egalitarian. To the egalitarian, the inequality in the situation where some live, and others die, is *very* bad and it matters a *great* deal. Still, as bad as the situation’s inequality is, *if* the cost of removing it were a situation where *none* survived, even the egalitarian could admit, qua pluralist, that the cost was too high.

D. Sufficiency and Compassion

Harry Frankfort has argued that “It is … reasonable to assign a higher priority to improving the condition of those … in need than to improving the condition of those … not in need (p. 267),” but he asserts that this is only because we have reason to give priority to the *needy*, not because there is any general obligation to give priority to those who are worse off. Thus, he contends that “We tend to be quite unmoved, after all, by inequalities between the well-to-do and the rich…. The fact that some people have much less than others is morally undisturbing when it is clear that they have plenty (p. 268).” Roger Crisp echos Frankfort’s position. He believes that when circumstances warrant our compassion we have reason to give priority to one person over another, but when people are “sufficiently” well off, compassion is no longer warranted and there is *no* reason to give priority to one person over another *merely* because the one is worse off.

Frankfort and Crisp’s positions challenge both egalitarianism and prioritarianism. But I don’t find their views convincing. To see why, consider the following example.

I have two daughters. My daughters aren’t superrich, but by the criteria that *truly* matter most, they are incredibly well off. Suppose the following is true. Both are extremely attractive and intelligent, have deep friendships, a stable home, a family that nurtures them, excellent schools, high self-esteem, financial security, rewarding projects, good health, fantastic careers and a long life ahead of them. In short, imagine that my two daughters are destined to flourish in all the ways that matter most. By any reasonable criteria, we must assume that my daughters will have “sufficiently” good lives.

Suppose I know this about my daughters. Suppose I also know that in fact Andrea is a little better off than Becky in most of the relevant categories, and as well off in all of the others. So, Andrea is smarter, has more rewarding friendships, will live longer, and so on. And suppose that the difference between Andrea and Becky is just a matter of blind luck. Neither Andrea nor Becky has done anything to deserve their different fortunes.

Finally, to make the example simple and clean, imagine that Andrea’s incredibly good fortune even extends to the most trivial of matters. She is, in a word, just plain lucky in everything she does. Here is one way in which she is lucky. Every time she goes for her weekly walk, she finds a twenty-dollar bill. She doesn’t look for money as she walks, or take particular routes where she thinks rich people with holes in their pockets tread, she just always comes across money when out walking. Blind luck. Of course, for someone as well off as she is in terms of what truly matters in life, finding $20 once a week doesn’t make much of a real difference to her life, but she never loses the thrill of finding money on her path, and it invariably brightens her day, and briefly brings a warm smile to her face and a glow in her heart.

Becky, on the other hand, doesn’t share her sister’s incredible luck. She walks even more regularly than Andrea, and takes similar paths at similar times. But for some reason, she never finds any money. Of course, in a life as rich and fulfilling as hers, this hardly matters, it simply means that she misses the excitement Andrea feels when she comes across money, together with its attendant outward smile and inward glow.

Finally, let us suppose that Andrea never mentions the money that she finds, not because she is hiding it from anyone, but because it never comes up. So, Becky isn’t the least bit envious of her sister’s good fortune. Indeed, we may add, if we like, that Becky is such a precious child, she wouldn’t be envious of Andrea’s good fortune even if she knew about it—she would just be happy for her.

Now suppose I knew all of this to be the case. And I was out walking with my two daughters. If I was walking down the path, and saw twenty dollars floating towards Andrea (yes, like manna from heaven!), I would think it would be better if a sudden gust of wind arose and blew it towards Becky instead, so that she could finally have that wonderful pleasure of “finding” money on a walk. More generally, I would want additional new benefits to go to Becky, rather than Andrea, to make up for the fact that Andrea was already destined to be better off than Becky over the course of her life.

On Crisp’s view, since Andrea and Becky both lead “sufficiently” good lives, compassion won’t be warranted, and hence there would be *no* reason for me to give Becky priority over Andrea in this way. I think Crisp is half right. I agree that in this case I wouldn’t feel *compassion* for Becky. Hers is not a life of misery or suffering, nor is it a life lacking in any of the ways that matter most. Still, I would give Becky priority in the manner suggested. Prioritarians would also give Becky priority over Andrea. And they might appeal to this example to support the view that giving priority to the worse off *doesn’t* depend on compassion, and doesn’t lose all its force once people are sufficiently well off. However, one might think prioritarians still have to explain *why* we feel Becky should get priority over Andrea in such a case. Of course, they might simply insist that it is because she is worse off! But this would simply assert what Crisp challenges them to defend, namely that prioritarianism *is* a legitimate moral principle.

Egalitarians, on the other hand, have an answer to Crisp’s challenge. It is pure luck that Andrea continually finds money and Becky doesn’t. Pure luck that Andrea is better off in many ways that matter. Hence, Becky is not merely worse off than Andrea, she is worse off through no fault, or choice, of her own. Egalitarians believe this crucial fact about the relation between Becky and Andrea provides them with reason to give Becky priority over Andrea. Not the reason provided by compassion, but the reason of equality, or comparative *fairness*.

Note, as above, if someone were to claim, on Becky’s behalf, that it wasn’t *fair* that she never found money, while her sister always did, it would be no *answer* to that charge for someone to retort that “life isn’t fair.” To the contrary, such a cynical retort vindicates the egalitarian’s view of the situation, even when it is offered in support of the view that we needn’t *do* anything about Becky’s situation. The egalitarian is acutely aware that “life isn’t fair.” That is the starting point of her view. What separates the egalitarian from the anti-egalitarian is the way she reacts to life’s unfairness. The essence of the egalitarian’s view is that comparative unfairness is bad, and that if we *could* do something about life’s unfairness, we have *some* reason to. Such reasons may be outweighed by other reasons, but they are not, as anti-egalitarians suppose, entirely without force.

Part II. Defending Egalitarianism Further, and Illustrating Its Distinct Appeal

A. The Wide Person-Affecting Principle and the Levelling Down and Raising Up Objections

As indicated above, many people are led to prioritarianism because they think it is the closest defensible position to egalitarianism, and they are led to reject egalitarianism by the Levelling Down and Raising Up Objections. Roughly, the Levelling Down Objection claims that there is *no* respect in which a situation is normatively improved *merely* by levelling down a better-off person to the level of someone worse-off, and likewise the Raising Up Objection claims that there is *no* respect in which a situation is normatively worsened *merely* by improving some people’s lives, even if those people are already better off than everyone else. But, it is claimed, since levelling down may undeniably decrease inequality, and raising up may undeniably increase inequality, this shows that there is *nothing* valuable about equality *itself*, and hence that substantive non-instrumental egalitarianism must be rejected.

Elsewhere,[[3]](#endnote-3) I have argued that the Levelling Down and Raising Up Objections have great intuitive appeal, but that they derive much of their force from a position I call the *Slogan*, according to which one situation *cannot* be worse (or better) than another *in any respect*, if there is *no one* for whom it *is* worse (or better) in any respect. I have shown that the Slogan must be rejected, and contended that this deprives the Levelling Down and Raising Up Objections of much of their rhetorical force.

Many people accept my claims about the Slogan, but still find the Raising Up and Levelling Down Objections compelling against non-instrumental egalitarianism. So, for example, this position has been argued for in print by Nils Holtug, Brett Doran, Campbell Brown, and Roger Crisp. Most such responses turn on rejecting the Slogan, as a *narrow* person-affecting principle, in favor of a *wide* person-affecting principle[[4]](#endnote-4) that assesses the goodness of alternative outcomes not in terms of how the particular people who would be in each outcome would be affected for better or worse, but rather in terms of how people are affected, for better or worse, in each outcome. [[5]](#endnote-5) Tim Scanlon once wrote “rights … need to be justified somehow, and how other than by appeal to the human interests their recognition promotes and protects? This seems to be the uncontrovertible insight of the classical utilitarians.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Followers of the view in question extend the “uncontrovertible insight” beyond rights to all of morality. As Crisp puts the point, “the worry arises from the idea that what matters morally could be something that was independent of the well-being of individuals (p.3).”

I accept my critic’s claim that one could reject the Slogan and still endorse the Levelling Down and Raising Up Objections, by moving to a wide person-affecting principle. And I readily grant that the wide person-affecting principle also has great initial appeal. But while a wide person-affecting principle can handle *one* of the problems I levelled at the Slogan, namely the Non-Identity Problem,[[7]](#endnote-7) it can’t handle any of the other problems I raised for the Slogan. For example, I noted that most people firmly judge that there is at least *one* respect in which an outcome where vicious sinners fare better than benign saints, is worse than an outcome where the sinners and saints both get what they deserve, even if the saints fare just as well in the two outcomes. But neither the Slogan *nor* the wide person-affecting principle can capture this judgment. Thus, like the Slogan, the wide person-affecting principle is unable to capture the non-instrumental value of proportional justice, a value to which many are committed. More generally, the wide person-affecting principle has the same fundamental shortcoming as the narrow principle, namely, that it allows *no* scope for *any* *im*personal moral values.

I have argued against basing the Levelling Down and Raising Up Objections on a wide-person affecting view at length elsewhere,[[8]](#endnote-8) and shall not repeat those arguments here. Still, let me observe the following. Wide person-affecting views combine the following two claims: claim 1, only sentient individuals are the proper objects of moral concern; and claim 2, for purposes of evaluating outcomes, individual well-being is *all* that matters. Although both claims can be questioned, for the sake of argument I am willing to accept claim 1. But claim 1 must be carefully interpreted if it is not to be deeply misleading. For example, claim 1 is most plausible—though still questionable—insofar as it asserts the moral primacy of sentient individuals, as opposed to groups or societies. But, importantly, sentient individuals are not merely the *objects* of moral concern, they are also the *source* of moral concerns, and of both moral and non-moral values. Thus, for example, rational agents can give rise to moral concerns and values that non-rational beings cannot.

Once one recognizes that sentient individuals are not merely the *objects* of moral concern, but also the *source* of moral concerns and values, claim 2 loses its appeal. For purposes of evaluating outcomes, why should we *only* care about the *well-being* of individuals? Why shouldn’t we *also* care about whether moral agents get what they deserve (justice), or how individuals fare relative to others (equality), or whether rational agents have acted freely, autonomously, or morally? Most humans have extraordinary capacities beyond their capacity for *well-being*. These capacities serve as a source of value in the world; for example, the value that can be found in friendship, love, altruism, knowledge, perfection, beauty, and truth. None of these values arise in a world devoid of sentient beings, and that truth may underlie claim 1’s appeal. But, importantly, such values *do* arise when rational or moral agents stand in certain relations to each other or the world. Moreover, I submit that the value of such relations is *not* best understood instrumentally; and in particular, that it does *not* lie *solely* in the extent to which such relations promote individual well-being. Individual well-being *is* valuable; but it is a grotesque distortion of the conception of value to think that it is the *only* thing that matters for the goodness of outcomes.

If one situation *couldn't* be worse than another in *any* respect, if it wasn’t worse for people, then the Raising Up and Levelling Down Objections would be compelling against egalitarianism. But if one situation *could* be worse than another in *one* respect, even if it wasn’t worse for people, then the Raising Up and Levelling Down Objections do little more than point out an obvious implication of non-instrumental egalitarianism. The non-instrumental egalitarian claims there is one respect in which an equal situation is better than an unequal one, even when it is not better *for* people. Proponents of the Raising Up and Levelling Down Objections insistently deny this, but, however heartfelt, an insistent denial hardly constitutes an argument, much less a crushing one.

*Isn't* it unfair for some to be worse off than others through no fault of their own? *Isn't* it unfair for some to be born blind, while others are not? And isn't unfairness *bad*? These questions, posed rhetorically, express the fundamental claims of non-instrumental egalitarians. Once one rejects person-affecting principles as capturing the *whole* of morality relevant to assessing outcomes, as I believe one should, there is little reason to forsake such claims in the face of the Raising Up and Levelling Down Objections.

But, the anti-egalitarian will incredulously ask, do I *really* think there is some respect in which a world where only some are blind is worse than one where all are? Yes. Does this mean I think it would be better if we blinded everyone? No. Equality is *not* all that matters. But it matters *some*.

B. The case of death.

Consider the following example. Many children are afraid of death. Parents who don't believe in an afterlife are often at a loss as to what they can honestly say to assuage their concerns. And in truth, there is not much one *can* say that will genuinely answer their children's worries. So, instead, grasping, parents often make a lot of orthogonal points—about how the old must make way for the young, about how much of what makes life so *valuable* is related to death, and so on. And one point parents often emphasize is how death is a part of life, that in fact *everyone* dies, and indeed, that *all* living things die.

It is striking that one should hope the *universality* of death would provide comfort to one worried about her *own* death. After all, the fact that everyone else will *also* die, doesn't lessen the terror of one's *own* death. Yet somehow, it seems worth noting that we are *all* in the same predicament. *Each* of us who lives, inevitably dies.

But suppose it weren't that way. Suppose some people had accidentally stumbled across, and eaten, some rare berries that miraculously made them immortal. So that in fact, while some people died, others lived forever. What should one then say if one's child lamented that she didn't want to die, and then added the plaintive complaint that it wasn't *fair*! Why, as one's child might put it, should *she* have to die, when Katie doesn't! It seems to me that in such a situation the charge of unfairness strikes deep and true. The situation *would* be unfair, *terribly* unfair, and this would be so even if the immortality berries weren't actually worse for those who remained mortal, but merely better for those on whom they bestowed eternal life.

Does this mean I think it would actually be worse, all things considered, if there were a limited supply of such berries? Not necessarily. But on the other hand, I'm glad I don't actually have to make such a decision. For as great as the gains of immortality might be for the fortunate ones, the resulting unfairness would be of cosmic proportions. It would be, to my mind, *terribly* unfair, and to that extent bad. So I contend that here, as before, something can be bad in an important respect even if it is not bad *for* people.

Advocates of the Raising Up and Levelling Down Objections are among the many anti-egalitarians mesmerized by "pure" equality's terrible implications. But, of course, equality is not the only ideal that would, if exclusively pursued, have implausible or even terrible implications. The same is true of justice, utility, freedom, and probably every other ideal. Recall Kant's view that "justice be done though the heavens should fall." Do we *really* think, with Kant, that it would be wrong to falsely imprison an innocent man for even five minutes, if that were necessary to save 1,000,000 innocent lives? Or consider the principle of utility, which would require us to torture an innocent person if only *enough* people had their lives improved by the tiniest of amounts because of our action. Or finally, consider the implications of unfettered freedom to act as one wants without government interference, as long one doesn't interfere with the rights or liberties of others. Such a principle might allow *complete* neglect of the least fortunate, even regarding *basic* necessities such as food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare. Such considerations do *not* show that justice, utility, and freedom should be rejected moral ideals, only that morality is complex.

The *main* lesson of the Raising Up and Levelling Down Objections is that we should be pluralists about morality. Egalitarians have long recognized, and accepted, this lesson. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for their opponents.

C. Equality or Priority One More Time

Egalitarians and Prioritarians will often agree on the same course of action. This is especially so given that egalitarians are pluralists. But it is important to emphasize that equality and priority express separate concerns, and represent distinct positions. To see this, consider the following example.

i. the case of the mineral-rich asteroid

Like some of my other examples, this example is far-fetched. But it clearly illuminates what is at stake between egalitarianism and prioritarianism. Imagine that you are in a spaceship, heading towards a distant galaxy. You learn that there is a mineral-rich asteroid that will soon arrive where you currently are. If you delay your travels, you can use your phasers to safely divert it to a planet below. Doing so will benefit the planet, because it will then be able to use the asteroid’s rich minerals. If you don’t linger, the asteroid will carry its minerals into deep space, where they will be of use to no one.

Here, most agree that I have *some* reason to linger and divert the asteroid, though the force of that reason will depend, among other things, on how much I’d be giving up by doing so, and how much the planet would actually benefit from my action. For example, if waiting for the asteroid would cost my child her life, I might permissibly fly on. On the other hand, if diverting the asteroid merely meant missing the opening act of an intergalactic opera, and the planet would use the minerals to save thousands, it would be heinous to fly on.

Next, consider two scenarios. On the first, it turns out that the planet below is *loaded* with valuable resources, and in addition has already received *many* mineral-rich asteroids. It is, in fact, smack in the middle of a mineral-rich asteroid path. Moreover, *no* other planets have benefited from such good fortune. To the contrary, the people on other planets have only been able to eke out a decent living by dint of incredibly hard work. Thus, on the first scenario, it turns out that the people on the planet below are, though no more deserving, *much better* off than everyone else in the universe.

On the second scenario, the people below are, in absolute terms, as well off as they were in the first scenario. But their planet has few natural resources, and they have had to work incredibly hard to achieve their current level of well-being. Moreover, they have been terribly *unlucky*. While they are in the middle of a mineral-rich asteroid path, they have yet to have a *single* mineral-rich asteroid land on their planet. There have been near misses, indeed *lots* of them, but nothing more. Moreover, every other populated planet is *loaded* with natural resources, and each has benefited from the arrival of *countless* mineral-rich asteroids. Thus, on the second scenario, it turns out that the people on the planet below are, though no less deserving, *much worse* off than everyone else in the universe.

Now the simple question is this. Does it make *any* difference at all, to the strength of one’s reasons to divert the asteroid, whether scenario one or two obtains? On a prioritarian view the answer to this question is “no.” All that matters on a prioritarian view is the *absolute* level of the people I might aid. Since, by hypothesis, the people are at the same absolute level in scenarios one and two, the sacrifice I should be willing to make to aid the people should be the same in both cases. On an egalitarian view matters are different. What matters is not merely the absolute level people are at, but comparative fairness. In scenario one, the people below are already better off than *everyone* else in the universe, due to pure good luck. In scenario two, the people below are already worse off than *everyone* else, due to pure bad luck. In the second case the people are the victims of natural unfairness. In the first, they are the beneficiaries of it. To my mind, however much I should sacrifice for the people below in the first scenario, I should sacrifice more, if necessary, in the second scenario, where the situation exerts a greater claim on me. The greater force of reasons in the second scenario has an egalitarian explanation. It is the difference in comparative unfairness that accounts for my reaction to the two scenarios.

This kind of an example is not an *argument* for egalitarianism. But it clearly illuminates the difference between egalitarianism and prioritarianism. And I am pleased to report that many share my judgment that the reasons for helping are more compelling in the second scenario than the first.

Still, some people are unmoved by such examples. They insist that *all* that matters to them is the absolute level of the people, so that the extent to which they should go out of their way to divert the mineral-rich asteroid would be the same in both scenarios.[[9]](#endnote-9) I can’t *prove* that such a position is mistaken, but I have a hard time believing that most people who espouse such a view are really governed by it in their thinking. To see why, let me consider one final example.

ii. The case of Ruth.

This example concerns a fairly “typical” poor person in the United States, whom I shall call “Ruth.” Ruth isn’t desperately ill or wretched, but she is the mother four, works two jobs, drives an old car, frequently worries how she’ll meet the payments on her two bedroom house, and has *no* idea how she’ll be able to send her children to college on the family’s annual income of $20,000.

Many are deeply moved by the plight of people like Ruth in a land where *so* many others live in half million dollar homes, own two or three fancy new cars, send their kids to private schools, take expensive vacations, and have annual household incomes well over $100,000.

Isn’t it clear that the extent to which people are moved to help people like Ruth is heavily influenced not merely by how she fares in *absolute* terms, but by how she fares *relative to the other members of her incredibly well-off society*? After all, we may suppose, at least Ruth has a roof over her head, indoor plumbing, a telephone, a TV, and a car. Moreover, she isn’t living in a war-torn country, or ruled by a dictator, and she needn’t fear smallpox, tuberculosis, malaria, or diphtheria. She drinks safe water, eats three meals daily, and has a reasonably long life-expectancy. In short, without romanticizing the plight of America’s poor, it seems that for most of human history, someone as well off as Ruth would be amongst the very best off. Moreover, importantly, I think Ruth must probably be counted amongst the world’s fortunate even taking full account of the genuinely bad effects of being poor in a rich society. To put the point bluntly, as bad as it may typically be to be relatively poor in a rich society, it is much worse to watch one’s child dying of starvation or disease!

I suspect, then, that if the world didn’t include others who were even better off, so that Ruth was actually better off than *everyone* else, we wouldn’t be *nearly* as concerned to improve her situation as we now are, and that this is so even if we assume, contrary to fact, that her absolute level in that situation would be *exactly* the same as it is now. Surely, our attitude towards America’s poor is deeply shaped by the presence of so many others who are *so* much better off. Assuming I’m right, is this just a mistake on our part? Prioritarians must contend that it is. I, respectfully, disagree. Although there are powerful reasons to care greatly about absolute levels, relative levels *also* matter. It seems unfair, and hence bad, for someone like Ruth to be much worse off than others through no fault, or choice, of her own. This view is captured by egalitarianism, but not by prioritarianism.

I submit, then, that however much we may care about other ideals, including, perhaps, prioritarianism, we should *also* care about equality as comparative fairness. I have certainly not *proven* that we should, but I believe that the illumination and considerations I have provided support such a view.

Let me end there, I look forward to your questions.

1. See, for example, Nicholas Rescher’s *Distributive Justice*, Bobbs-Merrill, 1967. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Amartya Sen seems to imply that various economists have held this position in *On Economic Inequality*, Clarendon Press, 1973. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See chapter nine of *Inequality*, "Harmful Goods, Harmless Bads" (in *Value, Welfare and Morality*, edited by R.G. Frey and Christopher Morris, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 290-324), and "Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection" (in *The Ideal of Equality*, edited by Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams, Macmillan and St. Martin's Press, 2000, pp. 126-161). My first discussion of this topic appeared in early drafts of my 1983 Princeton PhD dissertation, *Inequality*. This discussion helped define and motivate prioritarianism—which I then called “extended humanitarianism”—as an alternative to “genuine” egalitarianism—which I now call substantive non-instrumental egalitarianism. I noted that prioritarianism was often conflated with egalitarianism, could avoid the levelling down objection, and might appear to many as the most plausible alternative to egalitarianism. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Derek Parfit introduces the distinction between narrow and wide person-affecting principles in part four of *Reasons and Persons* (Clarendon Press, 1984) see especially sections 134-136. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Advocates of this kind of view include Nils Holtug, in “Good for whom?” (forthcoming, *Theoria*), Brett Doran in “Reconsidering the Levelling-down Objection against Egalitarianism,” (*Utilitas* 13, No. 1, March 2001, p. 65-85), and Campbell Brown in his unpublished manuscript “How to Have the Levelling Down Intuition and Reject the Slogan Too” (Australian National University). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “Rights, Goals, and Fairness,” reprinted in *Public and Private Morality*, edited by Stuart Hampshire, Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Here I followed Derek Parfit, who identifies the Non-Identity Problem and demonstrates its devastating implications for narrow person-affecting principles in part four of *Reasons and Persons*. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See my response to Nils Holtug’s “Good for whom?” in part one of “A Reply to My Critics” (forthcoming, *Theoria*). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Dan Brock claimed to hold such a view in a seminar I gave on “The Meaning of Equality” at the National Institute of Health, (Bethesda, Maryland, Spring 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)