EQUALITY, PRIORITY OR WHAT?

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This paper aims to illuminate some issues in the equality, priority, or what debate. I characterize egalitarianism and prioritarianism, respond to the view that we should care about sufficiency or compassion rather than equality or priority, discuss the levelling down objection, and illustrate the significance of the distinction between prioritarianism and egalitarianism, establishing that the former is no substitute for the latter. In addition, I respond to Bertil Tungodden’s views regarding the Slogan, the levelling down objection, the Pareto Principle, leximin, the principle of personal good, strict moderate egalitarianism, the Hammond Equity Condition, the intersection approach, and non-aggregative reasoning.

This paper is divided into two parts. In Part I, I present a particular version of egalitarianism. I show that the egalitarian’s concerns cannot be adequately captured by considerations of sufficiency, compassion or priority. In addition, I raise doubts about the levelling down objection, and positions that might underlie it. In Part II, I respond to Bertil Tungodden’s excellent essay, “The value of equality”.
state theory of well-being or a preference satisfaction theory, why should we only care about the well-being of individuals for purposes of evaluating outcomes? Once one recognizes that sentient individuals are not merely the objects of moral concern, but also the source of moral concerns and values, why should we not 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, morality and truth. None of these values arises 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 I believe 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.

Egalitarians believe that it is unfair for some to be born blind, while others are not. And they believe that unfairness is bad. So they believe there is one respect in which an all-blind world would be better than one where some are blind and others sighted; it would be better regarding comparative fairness. But egalitarians do not believe that we should blind everyone; first, because there may be deontological reasons prohibiting such action and, second and more importantly, because egalitarians are pluralists, and the all-blind world is surely worse than the partially-blind one, all things considered. Equality is not all that matters. Still, it matters some, and I see little reason for the egalitarian to forsake that conviction in the face of the levelling down objection.

E. Equality or Priority

Egalitarians and prioritarians will often agree on the same course of action. This is especially so given that egalitarians are pluralists. Correspondingly, some may wonder whether we need to bother debating the merits of the two positions. I think we do. As a philosopher, I am not merely concerned with the conclusions people hold, but with their reasons for those conclusions. Appeals to comparative fairness involve one set of commitments; appeals to the diminishing marginal value of well-being, with its attendant distinction between subjective and objective value, involve another. Both views may be plausible, or neither. But however similar the practical consequences may be of egalitarianism and
prioritarianism, it is important to recognize that they are distinct positions, with different implications, and that each must be assessed in its own terms.

To illuminate what is at stake between egalitarianism and prioritarianism, consider the following far-fetched example. Imagine that you are traveling in a spaceship and have learned that there is a mineral-rich asteroid heading your way. If you delay your travels, you will be able to safely divert the asteroid to a planet below which will then benefit from the asteroid’s rich minerals. If you do not linger, the asteroid will carry its minerals into deep space, where they will be of use to no one. Here, most agree that you would have some reason to linger and divert the asteroid, though the force of that reason would depend, among other things, on how much you would be giving up by doing so, and how much the planet’s members would actually benefit from your action.

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

On the second scenario, those 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 worked incredibly hard to achieve their well-being. Moreover, they have been terribly unlucky. While they are in the middle of a mineral-rich asteroid path, not a single asteroid has landed on their planet. There have been lots of near misses, but nothing more. Meanwhile, every other populated planet is loaded with natural resources, and has benefited from countless mineral-rich asteroids. Thus, on the second scenario, those 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 is “no”. All that matters 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 things are different. What matters is not merely the absolute level people are at, but comparative fairness. In scenario one, those below are already better off than everyone else in the universe, due to pure good luck. In scenario two, those below are already worse off than everyone else, due to pure bad luck. In the second scenario, 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 those below in the first scenario, I should sacrifice more, if necessary, in the second scenario, where the situation exerts a greater claim on me. To my mind, 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.\footnote{Some people balk at making cross-world moral assessments. I think this is a mistake and so I use such examples on purpose. Still, I trust it is clear that an analogous argument could be made in terms of ships, floating resources, and different islands on our world.}

This kind of example is not an independent argument for egalitarianism, but it clearly illuminates the difference between egalitarianism and prioritarianism. And I am pleased to report that many share my judgement 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 \textit{all} that matters are people’s absolute levels, so that the effort they should make to divert the asteroid would be the same in both scenarios.\footnote{Dan Brock claimed to hold such a view in a seminar I gave on “The meaning of equality” at the National Institutes of Health, (Bethesda, Maryland, Spring 2002). His contention prompted the response I offer next.} I can not \textit{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.

This example concerns a fairly “typical” poor person in the United States, whom I shall call “Ruth”. Ruth is not wretched, but she is a single parent of four, works at two jobs, drives an old car, worries how she will meet the payments on her two bedroom apartment, and has no idea how her children will afford college on her $20,000 income. 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 fancy new cars, send their children to private schools, take expensive vacations, and have household incomes well over $100,000.

Is it not clear that the extent to which many are moved by Ruth’s situation is heavily influenced not merely by how she fares in \textit{absolute} terms, but by how she fares \textit{relative} to the other members of her extraordinarily 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 is not living in a war-torn country, or ruled by a dictator, and she need not 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 suffer from starvation or disease!

I suspect, then, that if the world did not include others who were even better off, so that Ruth was actually better off than everyone else, we would not be nearly as concerned to improve her situation as we now are, and that this would be so even on the assumption that the net changes in Ruth’s life balanced out, so 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 this is 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 no more deserving than she. This view is captured by egalitarianism, but not by prioritarianism.

**PART II**

Bertil Tungodden’s essay, “The value of equality”, is extremely rich. Tungodden offers an economist’s perspective on the equality or priority debate, and a principled justification for his perspective that both draws on and illuminates the philosophical literature. Unfortunately, I can only comment on a few of the many topics Tungodden impressively addresses. For clarity, my remarks follow Tungodden’s organizational structure.

**F. Section 3: The Levelling Down Objection and the Slogan**

Tungodden disputes my claim that

*The Slogan*: One situation cannot be worse than another in any respect, if there is no one for whom it is worse in any respect.

underlies many arguments in economics and philosophy. He begins by doubting my claims regarding economics, writing that he has “not seen any economist explicitly supporting the slogan” (pp. 13–14). But he proceeds to wonder whether the slogan really is invoked by philosophers either. He notes four of the philosophical arguments where I claim the Slogan is

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15 This section responds to Tungodden (2001), and all page references in this section are to the 6 March 2001 typescript version circulated prior to the 2002 European Conference on Analytic Philosophy held in Lund, Sweden. There are two reasons for this. First, I did not receive the revised version of Tungodden’s manuscript in sufficient time to appropriately amend my remarks before this article had to go to press. Second, and more importantly, I believe that many people will share the views Tungodden originally expressed in his 2001 typescript, and that there are important philosophical points to be made in response to those views, even if Tungodden, himself, is no longer fully committed to his original claims.