Egalitarianism and the Difference Between Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Judgments

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1. Introduction

Egalitarianism came into its own as a moral theory during the 1970s. The most important factor was the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971), but writers like Thomas Nagel (1970, 1979), Ronald Dworkin (1977), and Thomas Scanlon (1976, 1982) also made valuable contributions. This school of writers produced worked-out egalitarian moral theories, theories that sometimes differed significantly in their content. But apart from the differences, these writers tended to share certain ideas about the source or the starting point of egalitarianism. At the deepest level, they tended to say the same things about egalitarian distributional constraints.

One shared idea was that egalitarianism involves, and perhaps depends on, there being a fundamental difference between interpersonal judgments and intrapersonal judgments. Interpersonal judgments distribute benefits and harms (for the sake of simplicity I will assume that benefits and harms, or increases and decreases in well-being, are the currency of egalitarianism, not resources or opportunities or capacities) between different people and so across different lives. Intrapersonal judgments distribute benefits and harms inside one life, a life led by a single self-identical person.

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The shared thought held that intrapersonal judgments are governed by a maximizing principle. When we are dealing with a single person, we should only be concerned with achieving the greatest possible surplus of benefits over harms, regardless of how those benefits and harms would be distributed inside the person's life from its beginning to its end. Prudential rationality on the part of the person whose life it is, and benevolent moral concern on the part of someone else acting in that person's best interest, agree in pursuing this goal.

By contrast, interpersonal judgments are not governed by a maximizing principle. We should not simply aim at bringing about the greatest possible surplus of benefits over harms when the benefits and harms in question will be experienced by different people. Just because we are dealing with different lives, distributional constraints apply to this choice. These constraints will be expressed by the principle of equality itself, which might of course be interpreted in different ways and might be assigned different degrees of strength when it is weighed against other moral values.

The writers tended to offer the same further explanation of this shared thought. They suggested that if a benefit and harm occur in the same life, and the benefit is greater than the harm, then the benefit morally outweighs the harm. It is better for the person to experience both than to experience neither. However, if the harm and benefit will be received by different people, the greater benefit might not morally outweigh the lesser harm. It is not necessarily better for one person to experience the harm and the other person to experience the benefit than for neither person to be benefited or harmed. The writers said that it is the moral importance of the so-called 'separateness of persons' that can prevent the benefit from outweighing the harm.

In the interpersonal case the two individuals are separate persons with separate lives, while in the intrapersonal case there is only a single person and one life, so nothing prevents the benefit from outweighing the harm. \(^1\)

I will call these ideas the 'standard egalitarian view'. Offering these ideas as an explanation of egalitarian moral concern has certain consequences. The price of defending the existence of egalitarian distributional constraints between lives is conceding that there are no such distributional constraints inside lives. Of course this is a price that the egalitarians of the 1970s were not at all reluctant to pay. In addition—although people did not remark on this consequence at the time—the idea will restrict the application of egalitarian principles to people's complete lifetimes. The concern for equality will turn out to be a concern for equality between people's complete lives when those lives are assessed from the cradle to the grave.

2. Equality Between Lifetimes

To see why this follows, suppose that there is a deep inequality at a particular time \(T_1\) between A's life and B's life, an inequality that favours A. Can this inequality between two simultaneous temporal parts or temporal stages in two different lives itself generate a reason for trying to create equality between the two lives at \(T_1\)? Remember that we are supposing that benefits can outweigh harms over time inside lives if not across lives. It is possible that at some other time \(T_2\) B's life might be better than A's life to exactly the same degree that A's life is better than B's at \(T_1\). If that were the case then B's advantage or benefit at \(T_1\) would outweigh or balance out B's disadvantage or harm at \(T_2\). If there is such outweighing inside B's life it seems that B's harm or disadvantage at \(T_1\) does not give us a reason to make B better off at \(T_1\). After all, B's disadvantage at that time is already compensated for by his advantage at \(T_2\), so B does not deserve extra compensation at \(T_1\). So to decide whether to redistribute between A and B at \(T_1\) we must check the rest of their lives for this kind of compensation. Essentially we have to compare the complete lives of A and B before we can decide whether to make an interpersonal judgment that there should be redistribution between them. This means that the concern for equality is a concern that their complete lives should be equally good. The temporal scope of egalitarian principles will be complete lifetimes.

Nevertheless, some have felt that there can be a case for a more equal distribution between temporal parts of lives. I was one of them, and I relied on intuitive judgments about particular examples to make this case (McKerlie 1989). In particular it seemed to me that there was something objectionable about allowing people who were old to live miserable lives while younger people were much better off. I thought this would remain objectionable even if this deep inequality in the present was compatible with their lives as temporal wholes being roughly equal. So I thought that there was a case

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1. Some egalitarians believed that the separateness of persons led initially to a moral position that was distinct from the egalitarian distributive principle itself, for example the view that benefits or harms in one life could never morally outweigh benefits or harms in a different life. They suggested that the egalitarian distributive principle could be derived from this moral position. This is to suppose that the moral importance of the separateness of persons can be used as a premise in an argument for the value of equality. For criticisms of such an argument, see Brink (1993) and McKerlie (1988).

2. Thomas Nagel comments that the fact that benefits can outweigh harms inside a life does not by itself give us a reason to think that benefits do not outweigh harms across lives—that is, maximizing in intrapersonal cases does not positively support accepting egalitarianism in interpersonal cases (1979: 120). I agree. The contrast between intrapersonal judgments and interpersonal judgments is central to egalitarianism because, once we have agreed that intrapersonal judgments are governed by a maximizing principle, we must think that interpersonal judgments are fundamentally different from intrapersonal judgments if we are to be egalitarians.
for redistributing between the young and the old to reduce the current misery of the elderly, and I assumed that the case would be expressed by some principle concerned with equality. My aim was to state explicitly the most persuasive version of such a principle, so that its reasonableness could be assessed.

However, I did not want to abandon the ideas about the source of egalitarianism that I have already described. I continued to suppose that there were no distributional constraints applying inside lives—that is, in the case of the different temporal parts or stages of the same life there was no claim to equality between those parts. I thought that my task was to explain how there could nevertheless be distributional constraints applying between the temporal parts of different lives.

3. Equality Between Parts of Lives

The nature of the positive view I wanted to defend led naturally to a criticism of the most influential theory about justice between the young and the old or justice between age-groups, the prudential lifespan account developed by Norman Daniels (1988). This theory claims (roughly) that the social distribution between people of different ages or age-groups, if it is to be just or fair, should match the distribution that prudential rationality would choose when distributing over the different temporal stages inside a single life. If we divide people's lives into the three temporal stages of youth, middle age, and old age, the theory says that the fair distribution at a particular time between people who are young, people who are middle-aged, and people who are elderly should match the distribution prudence would prefer over the three temporal stages of youth, middle age, and old age. This theory uses a prudential diachronic judgment made about a single life as the criterion for a just synchronic distribution between different people, where the later distribution is essentially a distribution between the temporal parts of different lives.

I hope my criticism of this view will be obvious. The prudential judgment made about a single life will be a maximizing judgment. This is appropriate given that we agree that equality does not apply inside lives. But we are investigating the possibility that a requirement of equality might apply between the temporal parts of different lives. If we take that possibility seriously, the prudential judgment about a single life will be a dubious criterion of justice just because it is a maximizing judgment. Daniels regards the conclusions reached by the prudential lifespan account as judgments about fairness in distribution between temporal parts in lives that are independent of fairness between complete lives. If we think that distributional constraints applying to temporal stages in different lives do exist, why should we suppose that the constraints are expressed by a judgment that simply maximizes?
own sake. But restricting the view in this way seems to mean giving a certain kind of moral importance to time itself or to facts about timing. It is in effect to say that simultaneous inequality is morally important while non-simultaneous inequality is not. If our intuitive judgments push us in that direction, some would be willing to accept that claim as well. But it is another commitment that we must be willing to assume in order to hold the view I defended.\footnote{If we do agree that it is inequality between simultaneous temporal stages in lives that matters, this will connect with another feature of the view. If we were to apply equality inside a life, it obviously could not be to different simultaneous temporal stages of that life. It would have to be to non-simultaneous stages. The restriction of egalitarian constraints to simultaneous stages is in line with the rejection of interpersonal egalitarian judgments, although that was not my reason for refusing to apply equality inside a life.}

As I have said, my case for this view depended on our intuitive judgments about examples. I did not argue that if we care about differences between lives for their own sake when we consider lifetimes we are also required to care about differences in simultaneous temporal parts of lives for their own sake when we think about temporal stages of lives. Someone might grant that I have shown that we could care in this way about inequality between temporal stages in lives—in the sense that I have shown that the basic ideas in egalitarianism do not rule out such a concern—but still hold that there actually is no reason to care about this kind of equality.

To put the concern more simply, my view requires that we think of a temporal stage in a life as an appropriate locus of distribution, as a morally significant unit that may have distributional constraints applying to it. But I did not give an argument for thinking of a temporal stage in a life in that way (apart from the appeal to examples). Someone may think that a lifetime—the complete life of a single self-identical person considered from its beginning to its end—is such a locus of distribution, but not be inclined to think that the same is true of a temporal stage. So the view that a temporal stage in a life is itself an appropriate locus for distribution is a third claim that we must be willing to accept to hold the view.\footnote{Temkin defends a similar view about equality between temporal parts of lives (1993, ch. 8).}

When I explained this view, I thought that we could hold it compatibly with also accepting an egalitarian principle concerned with equality between lifetimes. It seemed to me that believing that inequality between temporal parts of lives could matter for its own sake did not rule out thinking that inequality between people's complete lifetimes also mattered for its own sake. And I also thought that by defending the view, given the account of its basic ideas that I have just provided, I was not committing myself to any specific conclusion about the respective importance of inequality between temporal parts of lives and inequality between lifetimes. A person who accepted that view might find extra reasons for thinking that it was more important to eliminate inequality between lifetimes than to end inequality between

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4. Parfit on Personal Identity and Equality

However, there was a more influential response to the standard egalitarian view which also made room for applying equality to temporal stages in lives. This response came from the work of Derek Parfit (1973, 1984). Parfit did not identify himself as an egalitarian, but he wrote at length about the relationship between egalitarianism and philosophical theories of personal identity.

Parfit defended what he called a 'complex' rather than a 'simple' view of the identity of persons (later he used the name 'reductionist' for his view). He maintained that personal identity consisted in psychological relations of connectedness and continuity holding between the experiences of what we consider to be one and the same person over time. The view gradually changed into the somewhat weaker claim that those psychological relations were what mattered with respect to personal identity—roughly, that the importance for rationality and for morality that was attributed to personal identity itself was better understood as the importance for rationality and morality of those relations themselves.

The implications that Parfit drew for egalitarianism were striking. The view made him question whether there was moral outweighing between benefits and harms inside one life. The psychological relations he describes will hold to varying degrees between the different temporal parts of the same life. The relations holding between my childhood and my old age are attenuated, at least when they are compared to the relations holding between myself today and myself tomorrow. The ordinary understanding of personal identity says that the relation of identity holds between myself as a child and myself as someone very old in exactly the same way that it holds between myself today and myself tomorrow. However, according to Parfit it is the psychological relations themselves that matter, not the relation of identity. We will look to those relations, not to identity, to determine when benefits outweigh harms. So if as a child I consider my old age, it is possible that a larger benefit when I am old will not count as outweighing a smaller harm during my childhood, if the psychological relations between those two temporal parts of my life are sufficiently attenuated.

If we accept this view, it will change what we think about both interpersonal judgments and intrapersonal judgments. In general its effect will be to make intrapersonal judgments seem to be more like interpersonal judgments. If we agree with Parfit, we think that harms and benefits might not balance one another out inside
the same life. This means that in the intrapersonal case we can believe that there are
egalitarian distributional constraints holding inside lives. So inside a life, maximizing
might not be the right principle for either morality or rationality.

In one sense Parfit's view challenges the standard egalitarian view. It allows us to apply egalitarianism inside a single life. But in another sense Parfit's view conforms to the standard view. It applies egalitarian constraints inside lives, but only because it maintains that if we think in the right way about personal identity we will realize that intrapersonal judgments are much more like interpersonal judgments than we previously thought them to be. The divisions between the different temporal stages of one life are at least to a certain extent like the divisions between different lives. So we apply egalitarianism inside a life because we have discovered there the same reasons that motivate us to apply egalitarian constraints between lives. The standard egalitarian view apparently depended on the existence of a contrast between intrapersonal judgments and interpersonal judgments. If we have changed our mind about intrapersonal judgments, it might seem that this will make it harder for us to make interpersonal egalitarian judgments. But this consequence does not follow. We can still maintain that benefits do not always outweigh harms across lives, so that egalitarian distributional constraints apply between different lives. And we could argue that this judgment is even stronger in the interpersonal case than in the intrapersonal case. The psychological connections between a harm in one life and a benefit in another life will be much weaker than the psychological connections between a benefit and a harm located at different times in the same life.

Parfit's view changes what we think about applying egalitarian constraints to temporal parts of lives. The most obvious consequence is that it makes it possible to apply egalitarian constraints to the different temporal parts of a single life. But it also has implications for applying egalitarian constraints to the temporal parts of different lives, as opposed to restricting egalitarian principles to the temporal scope of complete lifetimes. If we are willing to apply the constraints to the temporal parts of the same life, it seems that we should not think that there is an objection in principle to applying them to temporal parts of different lives.

One concern about my own view was that some might doubt whether a temporal part of a life really is an appropriate locus of distribution. If we agree with Parfit, these doubts are removed. His view explains why a temporal unit other than a lifetime can be an appropriate locus of distribution—given his view about personal identity, benefits might not outweigh harms inside a life. Parfit's view also answers the original argument against caring about distribution between temporal parts of different lives. That argument appeals to the fact that if B is worse off than A now B might be compensated for this disadvantage by receiving benefits that A does not receive at earlier or later times. However, Parfit's view applies to B's life in the same way that it applies to A's life. If we agree with Parfit then even if B is benefited at other times those benefits might not actually outweigh the harm that B experiences now. Since Parfit's view can answer the objection in this way it is not forced to maintain that we should care about equality in the special way that I have described in explaining my own view. My view offered a complicated response to the objection that some will find unconvincing; Parfit's response to the same objection is simpler.

Parfit's view may make it easier to think that there are distributional constraints holding between the temporal parts of different lives, but it also has another consequence. If our concern with temporal parts of different lives rests on Parfit's foundation, it will not be exclusively concerned with inequality between the simultaneous parts of different lives. Parfit's ideas support distributional constraints between the non-simultaneous parts of the same life, so they should also make the case for the moral importance of equality holding between the non-simultaneous parts of different lives. Each temporal stage of each life will be an appropriate locus of distribution, so it seems that we should be concerned with minimizing inequality between all of those temporal stages. As I have said, I think that this conclusion has very little intuitive support.

It is the other side of this feature that Parfit's view does not give moral importance to the fact of simultaneity of two temporal stages of lives, as my view did. Some might see this as an advantage of his view, despite my claim that it is intuitive to restrict our concern to equality between the simultaneous parts of different lives.

However, Parfit's view might clash in an even more serious way with our intuitive judgments. It applies equality inside a life. This means that if the view understands the value of equality in a certain way, the view might tell us to 'level down' inside lives. That is, if A is much better off at T1 than at T2, we might reduce A's level of welfare at T1 simply to reduce the inequality between the two temporal stages of A's life even if this does not improve A's level of welfare at any other time. This is extremely counter-intuitive. I find it far more implausible than the suggestion that we should level down across different lives to achieve equality between lifetimes.

Parfit's earlier writing about egalitarianism did not reveal whether he thought it was reasonable to value equality this way. His more recent work on the relationship between equality and priority seems to indicate that he would not wish to value equality in a way that would permit levelling down, so this might be his answer to this...
objection (Parfit 1995). Someone might also attempt to meet it by arguing that if we were to fully adopt Parfit’s way of thinking of personal identity and its consequences then we would no longer be inclined to think that levelling down inside one life was strongly objectionable.

There is also a question about the compatibility of Parfit’s view with applying distributional constraints to lifetimes as well as to temporal parts of lives. If the view changes the temporal scope of egalitarian principles, perhaps the change is a matter of replacing the traditional view that we care only about the temporal unit of a lifetime with the view that we should care only about the temporal unit of a temporal stage in a life.

Some views about personal identity would have that consequence. They would claim that we should replace the thought that there is a single person who persists throughout a complete lifetime by the thought that a so-called person is really only a series of distinct selves that stand in psychological relations to one another. If we reduce the person to the sequence of selves we might think that we should only be concerned with inequality between selves—whether the selves are part of the same lifetime or not—and that we should not be concerned about inequality between persons.

However, the view about identity need not take the form of replacing an ontology of persons by an ontology of selves, and in Parfit’s work it never did take that form. When he did offer an account of what a person is, the reduction was to relations between experiences, not to selves understood as ontologically basic. Those psychological relations will hold to some extent across a complete lifetime, even if Parfit himself tends to emphasize how the relations can be attenuated over time and what he sees as the important implications of that attenuation. So Parfit’s view is compatible with understanding a lifetime as a morally significant unit (albeit presumably it is not as morally significant as it would have been if the simple view of identity had been correct), and as a significant unit with respect to the application of egalitarian principles. His view gives us a reason to care about temporal parts in lives, but it does not eliminate the reason to care about lifetimes.

The reader will have noticed that Parfit’s view avoids the three claims that my own view was committed to: the need to care about equality in a particular way, the claim that time has a certain kind of moral importance, and the claim that a temporal stage in a life counts as a locus of distribution. Nevertheless, I think it faces serious problems. One problem is that it is very difficult to specify what kind of weakening in psychological connections would be needed to trigger the consequences for morality and rationality that Parfit describes. Arguably, even if we agree with Parfit about the potential significance of these psychological relations, the kind of weakening that we find in ordinary human lives over time (as opposed to, for example, a life in which the person is afflicted with severe dementia in old age) would not be enough to make outweighing problematic. This would mean that the consequences that Parfit describes would not actually follow. Also (though this is hardly an argument), some readers feel that Parfit’s view gets the order of explanation backwards. Parfit appeals to ideas about personal identity to explain why we are inclined to make judgments about morality and rationality that are concerned with temporal parts of lives rather than with lifetimes. But I think myself that those judgments are a response to the significance we attach to time and the passage of time, or to the special importance of the present, or to important changes in values and character during a person’s life.

Our explanation of these judgments should come from a moral principle that asserts the importance of those facts themselves, not from a metaphysical theory of personal identity (although the moral principle that I think provides the best explanation does not assert the importance of any of those facts in a simple way). It might be the fact that we make those judgments on the basis of some such moral principle that helps to make Parfit’s view about the basis of personal identity seem persuasive, not the other way round.6

5. Priority and Time

The final view I will consider was formulated after egalitarians had distinguished between the values of equality and priority. Some have argued that despite its apparent persuasiveness the distinction cannot be clearly drawn, but I will not attempt to answer those objections in this chapter.

The basic idea in the Priority View is that a benefit can be more important, or can have more value, if it is received by someone who is badly off rather than by someone with a higher quality of life or level of well-being. In virtue of this a smaller benefit for someone badly off might be more important than, and so might morally outweigh, a larger benefit for someone better off.

It is striking that the writers who first tried to make this claim plausible tended to focus on examples where our choice was between helping someone who was currently badly off versus helping someone whose present level of well-being was high. A typical

6 McMahan (2002) is work in Parfit’s tradition, although McMahan does not discuss equality. McMahan thinks that the strength of the psychological connections holding between the temporal parts of a person’s life will have important consequences for moral choices, although on his view these psychological relations do not constitute personal identity. McMahan seems to think that the consequences only follow when the psychological relations are extremely weak—for example, the connections holding between a fetus and the adult person the fetus eventually becomes, or the connections between an elderly person and her future self after she has been stricken by a severe form of Alzheimer’s disease.
case might involve a contrast between one person who was experiencing agonizing pain and someone else who was also suffering but not nearly so acutely. The suggestion would be that it might be more important to relieve at least some of the first person’s pain rather than to relieve a larger amount of the second person’s pain. Those writers did not start with cases in which one person has a significantly worse complete life than someone else and then argue that it was the first person who deserved to be helped even if he would receive those benefits at a particular time when he happened to be very well off.

In other words, the examples that were the most effective at persuading people to take priority seriously focused on the current state of people’s lives, on their levels of well-being at a particular time. This point was not emphasized in the early discussions of priority, but it raised the posibility that one application of the idea of priority with strong intuitive support was to a person at a particular time, or to a temporal stage of a person’s life, rather than to an entire lifetime.

I tried to say more about such an application of the notion, just as I had done with equality (McKerlie 2002). However, it seemed to me that there was a case for making different choices in spelling out the view about priority than the choices I had made for equality. The differences came out in the answers that we gave to the questions about egalitarianism that I have been discussing.

To be more specific, it seemed to me that there was a simple, intuitive, and persuasive way of stating the principle underlying judgments of this kind of priority, the priority that applies to a person at a particular time. We need only say that the value of a benefit depends on the level of well-being of the person who receives the benefit as well as on the size of the benefit. Here the well-being in question is the level of well-being of the person at the time at which the benefit is experienced.

This principle seemed to capture the judgments that I wanted to make about examples involving pain. However, an obvious point to make about the principle is that unless we deliberately choose to restrict its generality it will apply inside lives as well as across lives. That is, the principle will apply when we are choosing between a benefit for A when A is well off and a benefit for B when B is badly off, but it will also apply to choosing between a benefit for A at a time when A is badly off and a benefit for A at some other time when A is better off.

This application of the idea of priority inside a life does not depend on any view about the nature of personal identity. It also does not appeal to a weakening of the psychological connections holding between A when the first benefit would be received and A at the time the second benefit would be experienced. The application is completely explained by the basic claim that the value of a harm or a benefit depends on the current level of well-being of the person who receives the benefit. Consequently, there is no need to argue that the relationship between different temporal stages in the same life is more like the relationship between different lives than we ordinarily think. Supporting the application just requires persuading us that we do make the judgments about an individual’s well-being at a time that the principle envisages.

Understood in this way, priority—whether it is applied to the temporal unit of a lifetime or to the temporal unit of a particular temporal stage in a life—is not an essentially comparative notion in the way that equality is. At the most basic level priority judgments are made about a single life, while judgments about equality are made about relations between lives or about relations between temporal stages in different lives or in the same life, if we have decided to extend the application of equality in these ways. If we are choosing between benefits for two different people, and we make priority judgments about both lives, the Priority View will give us an answer as to which person it is more important to help, and in that sense the Priority View makes a comparative judgment. But the priority judgments we make about each life—the judgment that tells us how much value a benefit for the first person would have given that person’s level of welfare, and the corresponding judgment about the second person—will be the same whether or not we then go on to compare the two different lives.

Since priority is not essentially comparative, it we apply it to temporal stages in lives there is no need to make an additional case that a temporal stage of a life is an appropriate locus of distribution. If we choose between the two benefits by appealing to priority our thinking is not essentially distributive in the way that it would be if we made the choice using the notion of equality. The conclusion we reach is accounted for by the basic claim about priority, not by the view that there are distributive claims.
applying to temporal stages of lives. So this view escapes one of the commitments of my view about equality.

The view also differs from my earlier view about equality with respect to time. I suggested that the earlier view objected specifically to equality between the simultaneous temporal stages in different lives. Restricting the view in that way implies that the temporal fact that the two stages occur at the same time has moral significance. In the case of the view that applies priority to temporal stages of different lives, I think there is no need for a similar restriction. The idea that the value of a benefit can depend on the current level of welfare of the person who receives that benefit applies in the same way to any temporal stage in any life, and it allows us to make judgments about the relative importance of benefits that would be received by different people whether the temporal stages that we are comparing are simultaneous or not. There are no reasons based on intuitive judgments for restricting the application of priority to temporal stages of lives to cases where we are comparing simultaneous stages of different lives. This means that the view escapes another commitment of the view about equality—as well as not having to maintain that a temporal stage in a life is an appropriate locus of distribution, we do not have to believe that a fact about timing has intrinsic moral importance.

I should also add that since the value being applied to temporal stages of lives is the value of priority, not equality, this view would not lead to levelling down when we compare different temporal stages in different lives. For the very same reason it would not lead to levelling down when we apply priority intrapersonally to the different temporal stages inside one life. We have seen that levelling down inside a life was at least a danger in the case of Parfit’s view, and in the case of other views that might choose to apply the value of equality both across lives and inside lives.

This application of priority departs from the standard egalitarian view since it applies the same idea of priority both inside lives and across lives. So it differs from my view about equality, which struggled to maintain consistency with the standard view. It is also different from Parfit’s view, which broke from the standard view but did so for reasons (Parfit’s revisionist ideas about personal identity) which did not challenge the moral claims in the standard view but rather changed their scope.

9 Is this claim compatible with my view that our intuitive judgments do support restricting the application of equality to the simultaneous stages of different lives? I think the difference is that equality, because it is a relative or comparative notion, introduces the question of which comparisons are relevant. I believe that when we think in terms of equality we will find comparisons between lifetimes to be relevant, and comparisons between the simultaneous stages of different lives, but not comparisons between the non-simultaneous stages of different lives. Priority is not a comparative notion, so it does not raise a question about which comparisons are relevant. I would agree that we do sometimes judge that there should be redistribution between non-simultaneous stages in different lives, but I think that these judgments are explained by priority rather than equality.

However, there is an explanation of why the application of priority does disagree with traditional egalitarianism. The traditional view of egalitarianism maintained a fundamental distinction between intrapersonal judgments and interpersonal judgments, since it rejected a maximizing principle in the case of interpersonal judgments and it assumed that intrapersonal judgments did depend on a maximizing principle. But if we apply priority to a temporal part of a life in the way I have explained—if we apply it inside a life—then we are supposing that the principle for intrapersonal judgments is not simply a maximizing principle. We might prefer a smaller surplus of benefits over harms in the case of a single life, depending on the level of welfare of the person at the times at which those benefits and harms would be experienced. And once we have rejected maximizing inside a life, we do not have the same reason to insist as traditional egalitarianism does that interpersonal judgments must be fundamentally different from intrapersonal judgments.

It also seemed to me that this view about priority did not inevitably lead to any conclusion about the relative importance of priority applied to lifetimes and priority applied to temporal stages in lives. A might have a worse complete life than B, but B might now be considerably worse off than A is now. In virtue of priority applied to lifetimes a benefit that A would receive now would have special value, but in virtue of priority applied to a person’s well-being at a particular time a benefit received by B now would also have special value. Nothing in the foundation of the view seemed to me to imply that one kind of priority would always be stronger than the other. Our conclusions about this question could only be based on the judgments that we found it plausible to make about particular choices.

Because this view makes priority judgments both inside and across lives, and the intrapersonal and interpersonal judgments are made for the same reason and have the same strength, the view is very simple. I think this simplicity should be counted as an advantage, provided that the view is not otherwise objectionable. It was the view’s simplicity (and not its avoidance of levelling down) that made me think it was more persuasive than my earlier view about equality. 10 If we agree that egalitarianism does include a concern for how people are faring at particular times, I have come to believe that this concern is best expressed in terms of priority rather than equality.

However, others will see the simplicity as a serious disadvantage. They will think that intrapersonal priority judgments and interpersonal priority judgments should differ in strength. They believe that the degree of priority awarded to the worse-off temporal stage should be greater when the stages we are comparing are stages in different lives than when we are comparing different temporal stages of the same

10 For the view that the Priority View is to be preferred on the basis of the levelling down objection, see Holtug, Ch. 5 in this volume, Sects. 4–6. For the opposite view, see Christiano, Ch. 2 in this volume, Sects. 20–1.
life. If we agree and change the view accordingly it will bring the view back into line to some extent with the standard egalitarian view that there should be a significant difference between intrapersonal and interpersonal judgments, even though we will be applying priority inside lives as well as across lives.

The strongest reason for making this change is that it seems undeniable that a lifetime is a morally significant unit. How can the difference between lives have moral significance if we make exactly the same judgments of priority across two lifetimes and inside one lifetime?

Nevertheless, I am not convinced that we should revise the view. I agree that we must treat human lives as morally significant units. But I think that we can do this by making priority judgments about lifetimes as well as temporal parts of lives. Why is this not sufficient acknowledgement of the moral importance of the difference between one life and another life? Why must we acknowledge it once again when we are considering temporal stages of lives rather than lifetimes, by insisting that the degree of priority is greater in an interpersonal judgment than in an intrapersonal judgment?

An example might help. Suppose that I can prevent a harm from being suffered by a person who is now much worse off than I am. Priority tells me to do it. However, also suppose that refusing to help is necessary to prevent me from experiencing the same harm at some future time when I will be just as badly off as the other person now is. If priority has the same weight inside lives and across lives, the Priority View will be indifferent about which choice I should make. If the degree of the priority is stronger in an interpersonal judgment then I should help the other person and accept the future harm.

I think it is indifferent. In reply someone might point out that I am better off now than the other person is, and ask how it could be right for me to allow him to suffer even more harm to save myself from suffering harm in the future. However, when we reason in this way we have slipped into thinking in terms of lifetimes. If I refuse to help I am allowing the current state of the other person's life to become even more worse than the current state of my life, and I am also making my own life better at the future time at which I would otherwise have suffered the harm. Other things being equal, this will make my complete life better than the other person's life. That is why we find it objectionable. It is not that we think that the other person's present condition has a stronger claim on my help than my own future condition. If we suppose that for other reasons the other person's lifetime would be better than my own in any event, the inclination to think that I must help the other person will vanish.

6. Conclusion

I have discussed three departures from the standard egalitarian view that would allow us to apply egalitarian values to temporal parts of lives. I think we should apply egalitarian values in that way. I also believe that the third view about priority provides the best account of such an application. This view departs from standard egalitarianism in the most radical way. However, I think it gives us good reason to doubt that egalitarianism always does require the existence of a fundamental difference between interpersonal judgments and intrapersonal judgments.

References


