

Chapter 31

Equality

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Introduction

The ideal of equality has led a double existence in modern society. In one guise the ideal has been at least very popular if not uncontroversial and in its other guise the ideal has been attractive to some and repulsive to others. These two aspects of equality are *equality of democratic citizenship* and *equality of condition*.

Equality of democratic citizenship has risen in stature because so many of the twentieth-century regimes that have flouted this ideal have been truly despicable. The ideal demands that each member of society equally should be assured basic rights of freedom of expression, freedom of religion, the right to vote and stand for office in free elections that determine who controls the government, the right not to suffer imprisonment or deprivation at the hands of the state without due process of law, the right to equal protection of the law construed as forbidding laws that assign benefits and burdens in ways that discriminate arbitrarily on the basis of such factors as race, creed, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity, and perhaps the right to an education adequate to enable one to fulfil the duties of democratic citizenship. Different theorists conceive the status of equal democratic citizenship somewhat differently; there is no firm consensus as to exactly what rights are essential to democratic citizenship or what should be the reach of these rights (see Chapter 25).

Equality of Condition

The notion

Beyond equality of democratic citizenship, the political ideal of egalitarianism encompasses something further. Every nation of the world is divided into haves and have-nots. In industrially advanced market economies, some persons live spectacularly well, some moderately well, some stagnate in poverty. The gap between the life prospects of the best-off and the worst-off individuals, in terms of wealth, income, education, access to medical care, employment and leisure-time options, and any other index of well-being one might care to name, is enormous. If one makes comparisons across rich and poor

nations, the gap between best off and worst off is vastly increased. Confronting these disparities, the egalitarian holds that it would be a morally better state of affairs if everyone enjoyed the same level of social and economic benefits. Call this ideal *equality of condition* or *equality of life prospects*.

Equality of condition as I have just characterized it is an amorphous ideal. It cries out for clarification. Exactly what sort of equality of condition is desirable and for what reasons? But before trying to answer that question I want to indicate that egalitarianism in its social and economic dimension has struck many observers as an uninspiring ideal or even as menacingly unattractive or horribly misguided. For the critics, egalitarianism is a dead end, so the exercise of clarifying the notion of equality of condition has been haunted by the worry that the task of clarification will turn out to have been an exercise in futility.

Preliminary doubts

'Equality literally understood is an ideal ripe for betrayal', writes Michael Walzer (1983, p. xi). Equality literally understood requires that everyone should get the same or be treated the same in some specified respect. For example, the regime of *simple equality* according to Walzer is a regime in which everyone has the same amount of money, the same income and wealth, and there are no restrictions on what can be bought and sold. Walzer's objection against simple equality is reminiscent of the distributive justice views of Robert Nozick (1974, pp. 160–4). Since individuals left unrestricted would freely exchange goods and make deals in ways that would swiftly overturn an initially established condition of simple equality, this norm could be upheld over time (if at all) only by continuous exercise of harsh coercion over individuals by the state. But any state capable of carrying out such coercion would become an irresistible target for takeover by a small elite, and the vast inequality in political power among citizens in a society governed by a controlling elite would overshadow the alleged evils of inequality of wealth and income.

This way of putting the point suggests that there might be several forms of literal equality worth seeking, equality of political power among them, and that simple equality of money should not be pursued with single-minded intensity at the expense of other values including the diverse valuable forms of literal equality. The lesson that Walzer wishes to draw from his discussion is quite different, however. According to him the analysis shows the futility of the pursuit of simple equality and by extension the futility of the pursuit of any other sort of literal equality. It is hopeless to try to achieve and sustain any significant literal equality, and the attempt to do so would inevitably steamroller individual liberty and wreak havoc generally. Therefore, we should not seek literal equality, thinks Walzer.

This argument for scrapping the ideal of literal equality proceeds too swiftly. From the stipulated fact that equality conflicts with individual liberty it does not follow that any trade-off that purchases some progress toward equality at the cost of some loss of individual liberty must be morally unacceptable. And from the stipulated fact that no significant norm of literal equality can be fully achieved and sustained it does not follow that the pursuit of no form of literal equality is worthwhile. For all that has been said so far, movement from a state of great inequality to a state of lesser inequality might

be feasible and, from a moral standpoint, highly desirable (Arneson, 1990a). (To clarify this claim, it would be necessary to assert a defensible rule that determines, for any two unequal patterns of distribution, which of the two is the more unequal. For analysis of various measures of inequality, see Sen, 1973.)

A further clue as to what considerations underlie Walzer's position is his suggestion that egalitarians would be well advised to renounce literal equality and seek to promote a non-literal equality ideal which he calls 'complex equality'. The ideal of equality must be complex because there is no one overarching distributional mechanism. Society is divided into distributive spheres, and within each sphere there will arise norms regulating the proper distribution of the good or goods that are unique to that sphere. Such autonomous distribution of each good by the norms of its sphere is threatened by the domination of distribution in one sphere by the outcome of distribution in another sphere; for example, when wealth procures political power or when political power subverts meritocratic job assignment. Walzer stipulates that complex equality obtains in a society when no such domination exists and distribution in all spheres proceeds autonomously according to the norms internal to each sphere.

It is hard to see in what sense complex equality is supposed to be *equality* (Arneson, 1990a; countered by Miller, unpublished). But the ideas – that many different sorts of goods are distributed in a modern society and that the proper way to distribute a good depends on the sort of good that it is – suggest reason to resist the idea that it is morally important to achieve equal distribution of some one good or equal distribution of some measure of all goods among all members of society. The idea that each distributive sphere has its own integrity which should be respected is reason to doubt that society should try to tinker with all distributions in order to achieve some overall measure of equality. There is no reason to expect that some invisible hand would bring it about that the distribution of goods within every sphere according to its own norms would yield an overall pattern of equal distribution, and adjustment by a visible hand would destroy the desired autonomy of the spheres. Or one might think that the various distributional outcomes will not be commensurable on a single scale. But if there is no overall measure of distributional outcomes then the ideal of overall equal distribution is a chimera.

To advance the discussion at this point we need to investigate how *equality of condition* might be defined so as to meet these objections lurking somewhat buried in Walzer's discussion of complex equality.

The Resourcist View of Equality of Condition

Equality of what?

We might start with the thought that people have equal chances to achieve whatever they might seek in life when each person commands equal resources. For the sake of simplicity, imagine that resources can be grouped into three categories: (1) leisure or free time; (2) income (a flow) and wealth (a stock), understood as the opportunity to purchase any of a given array of goods at going prices, up to the limit of one's monetary holdings; and (3) freedom to use whatever goods one possesses in desired ways, within

broad limits. One initial difficulty with this resourcist conception of equality of condition is that it does not seem to realize the ideal of equal life chances for all citizens. Consider a simple example (Arneson, 1989). Suppose that Smith and Jones have similar tastes and talents, but Smith is born legless and Jones has two good legs. Endowed with equal resources (money, leisure time and freedoms), Smith must spend virtually all his money on crutches whereas Jones is able to use his money to advance his aims in a rich variety of ways. In this example it does not seem as though equality of resources guarantees that Smith and Jones enjoy equality of material condition or equality of life chances in any sense that matters.

The objection against a resourcist measure of equality is that it makes more sense to consider what people are enabled to do and be with their resource shares and measure these opportunities than to fixate on resource shares. Resources are means, and (the objection goes) it is fetishistic to focus on means rather than on what individuals gain with these means (Sen, 1980). People are different, and among the differences among people are differences in individuals' capacities to transform given stocks of resources into satisfaction of their goals. Since resources matter to us insofar as they enable us to achieve goals that matter to us, a proper measure of equal life chances should register variations in people's opportunities to fulfil their goals. This fetishism objection against a resourcist measure of equality suggests two alternative standards: we could measure either (1) to what extent individuals are able to fulfil the goals that they themselves value, or (2) to what extent individuals are able to fulfil goals that are deemed to be objectively valuable or worthwhile. In broad terms, the two options are equality of utility or welfare and equality of valued functionings (Sen, 1985, pp. 185–203).

The advocate of a resourcist conception of equality can try to defend her position with two lines of argument. Responding defensively, the resourcist can suggest that the Smith and Jones example only shows that the domain of resources that should be captured by an equality measure should include internal resources of the person as well as external resources. Healthy legs are a valuable personal resource; so, other things equal, Smith who lacks legs is lacking in resources as compared with Jones who is equipped with a healthy pair of legs. This thought gives rise to the extended resourcist ideal of equality of external resources plus talents broadly construed.

At first glance it is not obvious what might be meant by an ideal of equality of individual talents. External resources such as money can be transferred from one individual to another, so the idea of shifting external resources so as to render people's holdings equal is readily comprehensible. But if talents are non-transferable and we eschew the option of achieving equality by destroying the superior talent of the better endowed, how could we conceive of achieving equality of individual talent endowments? We could implement compensatory education offsetting differences of native endowment, but aside from the evident great inefficiencies that would result from any serious effort in this direction, for many talent differences no amount of training could compensate: no feasible educational regimen would enable me to play piano, run high hurdles or solve mathematical problems as well as people who are natively gifted at these endeavours.

One ingenious resourcist ploy, introduced by economists and developed for philosophers by Ronald Dworkin, is to interpret equality of internal and external resources as

satisfied when persons assigned identical bidding resources bid to an equilibrium in which all external and internal resources are put to auction (Varian, 1974; Dworkin, 1981). When one person bids to purchase a person's internal resources – her own or another's – in this auction, ownership is interpreted as ownership of hours of time of the person who has the resource, and ownership of time in turn is interpreted as ownership of labour power – the right to demand from the possessor of the resource the highest amount of money that the person could have earned in the labour market working for the length of time that is owned. On this conception any talent an individual possesses that enhances the value of an hour of her labour power is an internal resource that is up for grabs in the imagined auction. In given circumstances the outcome of such an auction would depend on the ensemble of the tastes and talents of the persons assigned equal bidding resources who participate in the auction procedure. In effect equality of resources so conceived gives each individual an equal share of social scarcity. The value of each resource as measured by the auction is (marginally above) the value placed on that resource by the person or persons in society who make the highest bid for it except for the winning bid.

The weakness in this conception of equality of resources as interpreted by the equal auction is that it leads to the 'slavery of the talented'. To see the difficulty, imagine that Smith has a great talent for singing, which commands a very high price in a given society. Other people will then be willing to bid a lot for hours of Smith's labour time in the equal auction. For each hour of her labour time purchased by others in the auction, Smith will have to work at her most lucrative employment for that hour in order to satisfy the legitimate demand for remuneration by the 'owner' of that hour. Smith's free time is a scarce social resource, so in order to obtain genuine free time for herself Smith must bid for hours of her time, on which the auction sets a high price. In contrast, the untalented Jones, whose labour time is not in high demand, can cheaply purchase hours of her free time for her own use. Smith is as it were enslaved by her talent in the equal auction (Roemer, 1985; 1986).

There are various *ad hoc* devices for avoiding this 'slavery of the talented' result. But none can carry conviction, because slavery of the talented is the straightforward result of applying the auction view of resources to personal talents in order to interpret the norm of equality of external and internal resources. It is not a quirk of formulation.

Against the fetishism objection stated at the beginning of this section, the resourcist has both a defensive and an offensive response. The defensive response is the idea of extending the equal auction to talents, which we have just found to be inadequate. Going on the offensive, the resourcist objects that neither the ideal of equality of welfare nor the ideal of equality of capabilities can satisfactorily interpret the intuitive pre-theoretical norm of equality of life chances. Let us take each objection in turn.

Against welfare as the measure

Imagine that we have a stock of goods to distribute to a given group of persons and that our guiding idea is that the distribution should count as equal if and only if it induces the same welfare or desire-satisfaction level for each person in the group. But suppose that Smith has expensive tastes and wants only champagne and fancy sports cars, whereas Jones has cheap tastes and wants only beer and a sturdy bicycle. Other things

equal, Smith must be assigned far more resources than Jones if the two are to satisfy their desires to the same extent. But according to the resourcist view, equality of welfare is an inadequate conception of equality of life chances, because individuals should be regarded as capable of taking responsibility for their ends, but equality of welfare takes tastes as given, as though they were beyond the power of individuals to control. Taking tastes to be fixed and dividing resources so that persons with different desires, which put varying pressure on socially scarce resources, end up at the same level of desire satisfaction is unfair to those who have cheap tastes (Rawls, 1982).

This objection initially sounds plausible but is rooted in confusion. In order to defend equality of resources it is urged against the norm of equality of welfare that people should be held responsible for their ends, so it is wrong to adjust resource shares so that whatever ends people select, they ultimately obtain equal welfare. What is being appealed to here is the thought that society should not compensate an individual who reaches one rather than another outcome if it lay within the individual's power to determine which outcome she reached. What lies within the voluntary control of an individual should be deemed to be her responsibility, not the responsibility of society.

That something is awry with this line of thought becomes plain when one reflects that what level of resources an individual succeeds in gaining for herself over the course of her life is to some considerable extent a matter that lies within her voluntary control. The idea that society should not take responsibility for compensating individuals for aspects of their situation that are within their power to control does not support equality of resources rather than equality of welfare.

There are two entirely independent issues that must be distinguished in this context. One issue is whether a norm of equality of condition should measure people's positions (to determine if they are equally or unequally situated) in terms of their resources, welfare or functionings. A second issue is whether a norm of equality of condition should be concerned to equalize the outcomes that individuals reach or the opportunities they have to reach various outcomes. The responsibility-for-ends objection in effect holds that it would be unfair to compensate an individual in the name of equality for a deficit in the welfare outcome she reaches if it lay within her voluntary control to have reached higher welfare outcomes. The objection then is urging that as egalitarians we should be concerned to render equal the opportunities that people enjoy rather than the outcomes that people reach by voluntary choice among their opportunities. If this is what the responsibility-for-ends objection is driving at, then it is strictly irrelevant to the issue of whether welfare, resources or functionings would be the best measure for a norm of equality of condition to employ.

This point can be misunderstood. I am not agreeing that individuals should always be deemed fully responsible for their final ends or basic life goals. To some extent these are set for each individual by her genetic endowment and early socialization and education, matters which lie beyond her power to control. Also, even if two persons could voluntarily alter their basic goals from A to B, this task might be extremely difficult or costly for one individual and easy or costless for the second individual. In this case individuals might be deemed responsible to different degrees for their ends (suppose they both adhere to the A goals) even though each of them could have altered her ends by voluntary choice. Third, sometimes even though it is possible for me to alter my ends it would be unreasonable for me to do so. Suppose I now value rock music and I know

there is a therapy regimen I could choose to undergo which would alter my tastes, as I suppose, for the worse, so that my taste for rock music would be supplanted by a love of country & western music. It is at least not clear that a norm of equality of condition should refuse to compensate me for any welfare deficit arising from the fact that I prefer rock over country & western music in these circumstances. The point is not that the responsibility-for-ends objection is fully acceptable but rather that to whatever extent the objection is well taken, it has no bearing on the choice of resources versus welfare as the measure.

Against functionings as the measure

Instead of evaluating people's resource holdings by determining what welfare levels they reach by means of these holdings, we could instead list specific things that their resources enable them to do or be. For example, a given allotment of food to a person can be assessed in terms of the nutritional and vigour levels that the food assists that person to attain. Notice, first, that the same pile of food would be transformed by different individuals into different functionings. Notice, second, that just as we can distinguish the actual level of welfare that a person reaches with her resources and the possible welfare levels that she could have reached had she chosen differently, we can distinguish the functionings an individual actually reaches with a given set of resources and the opportunity set of functionings that the individual could have reached with that set of resources. Amartya Sen speaks in this connection of the *functioning capabilities* provided for a particular person by a given set of resources (Sen, 1990). Here then is another conception of equality: arrange distribution so as to render people's functioning capabilities the same.

At this point the resourcist can object that an indexing problem looms. An egalitarian norm has to incorporate a measure such that one can determine whether or not individuals endowed with mixed lots of resources should be deemed equal or not. But given that there are indefinitely many kinds of things that persons can do or become, how are we supposed to sum a person's various capability scores into an overall total? In the absence of such an index, equality of functioning capabilities cannot qualify as a candidate conception of distributive equality. If your resources give you capabilities A, B and C, and mine give me capabilities C, D and E, our capability sets are non-comparable. Only if your set dominates mine, containing everything in mine plus more, is comparison possible. In the general case, comparison will be possible only if we accept a perfectionist standard which ranks the value of all the functionings that an individual's resources enable her to reach. But the resourcist will further object that no single perfectionist scale of value could possibly be an acceptable basis for interpersonal comparisons for the administration of a distributive equality norm in a modern diverse democracy. For example, capabilities could be assessed according to a Roman Catholic standard that gives priority to prospects of salvation, but a norm of equality of condition rooted in this or any other perfectionist dogma would rightly seem merely arbitrary to many citizens. Equality of functioning capabilities thus collapses as an alternative to equality of resources.

We are now in a better position to appreciate Walzer's doubts about equality of money. We can suppose that equality of money stands as a proxy for the more general

doctrine of equality of resources. Pluralism defeats this ideal – not so much the pluralism of types of goods cited by Walzer but rather the plurality of reasonable evaluative perspectives that citizens might take toward the goods they have. How can we determine definitively that people's holdings of resources are to be judged equal or unequal when individuals will differ in their evaluations of those resource sets? The indexing problem arises for the equality of resources ideal and so far as I can see proves fatal to it (Arneson, 1990b). Given that there are many sorts of resources or goods that individuals may command, in order to decide whether people's holdings are equal or unequal we need to be able to attach an overall value to the holdings of each person. There are just two possibilities. Either resources are indexed by individuals' subjective evaluation of the contribution their resources can make towards their welfare or they are indexed by some scale of value that is deemed to be objectively valid regardless of people's subjective evaluations. This would be a perfectionist norm. In short, equality of resources must collapse either into a welfarist or a perfectionist view, into equality of welfare or equality of valuable functionings.

Equality of Condition: Rivals and Alternatives

Equality versus the doctrine of sufficiency

Harry Frankfurt has advanced strong objections against the doctrine that it is intrinsically desirable that everyone should have the same income and wealth. Some of his objections apply more broadly than just to this specific target. They reach any form of equality of condition.

With respect to the distribution of income and wealth, the argument goes, what should matter intrinsically to an individual is not how well he does compared to others. What matters is not whether one has more or less money or other resources than other persons but rather whether one has enough, given one's aims and aspirations. This rival to egalitarianism can be labelled the *doctrine of sufficiency*. According to Frankfurt, the amount of resources one possesses is sufficient if a reasonable and well-informed person with one's basic aims would be content with that amount and would not actively seek more. Egalitarian doctrines by contrast tend to focus people's attention on questions of comparison – the size of my resource bundle compared to the amount of resources that other individuals command. By encouraging people to think that these comparisons matter intrinsically, even though on a proper analysis they do not matter intrinsically at all, egalitarianism is alienating. It diverts people's energy, their focus of attention and their will to critical reflection away from matters of substance and toward matters that do not really intrinsically matter (Frankfurt, 1987).

Once one clearly distinguishes the question of whether one has enough from the question of whether one has more or less than other persons, the examples that some philosophers offer to illustrate the intrinsic importance of equality will be seen to show nothing of the sort. The resource egalitarian tries to present her favoured principle in an attractive light by considering its application to a situation in which society is divided into income classes that include a very poor and a very rich group. The resource egalitarian then describes the squalid living conditions of the poor. Their infant

mortality rate is high, they lack proper nutrition, clothing and shelter; they are ravaged by diseases that are preventable with the help of medical assistance they cannot afford. The poor are denied access to all but the shabbiest education and degrading, rote, unskilled jobs. They are cruelly afflicted by vulnerability to crime. And so on. In all these respects the rich enjoy vastly more favourable life expectations. The resource egalitarian then invites us to accept the moral principle that other things equal it is morally desirable that people should have equal money (or, more broadly, equal resources).

The proponent of the doctrine of sufficiency protests that the considerations adduced in the presentation of such examples do not support egalitarianism. For the story the egalitarian tells is one according to which the poor manifestly do not have enough to enable them to lead decently satisfactory lives. The poor are also described as worse off than the rich along the dimension of resource share possession. But is the morally salient feature of the example, prompting the judgement that resources ought to be transferred from the rich to the poor, really the relative disadvantage or rather the insufficiency suffered by the poor?

The sufficiency advocate proposes a way to answer this question. Imagine that all of the members of a society enjoy a very high standard of living, so that everyone can reasonably be presumed to have sufficient resources to support a thoroughly satisfactory life, even though the relative gap between the wealth and income of the rich and poor remains just as large as in the first example described by the resource egalitarian. In comparative terms, the poor are just as badly off in the revised example, in which they enjoy a high level of affluence, as they were in the original example. Resource egalitarianism would then seem to be committed to the judgement that the moral imperative of transferring resources from rich to poor is equally compelling in the two examples. Many will find this judgement unappealing. In contrast, the sufficiency advocate has a ready explanation for the judgement that the case for transfer from rich to poor is strong in the first example and non-existent in the second example. In the second example it is plausible to suppose that the poor have enough, and how resources are distributed above the line of sufficiency is simply not important from a moral standpoint.

Frankfurt's argument is explicitly directed against the doctrine that upholds equality of money, and some of his comments reflect the thought that it is fetishistic to attach intrinsic significance to resources rather than the extent to which people are enabled by their resource shares to satisfy reasonable goals. So understood, his argument, if successful, would rebut resource egalitarianism, not welfare egalitarianism. But the sufficiency advocate is better interpreted as opposing all versions of equality of condition, not just resourcist versions of this doctrine. The problem is not (merely) that the resource egalitarian is focusing on the wrong sort of comparisons. According to the doctrine of sufficiency, the flaw in egalitarianism lies deeper. Any distributive doctrine that ascribes intrinsic significance to comparisons of relative shares – and hence any egalitarian doctrine – is wrong-headed and fetishistic.

The argument of the sufficiency theorist against egalitarianism raises complex issues. I shall respond briefly to three major issues that should be held distinct.

Resource egalitarianism is fetishistic We care about resources only because either they can do something for us or we can do something with them. Even Silas Marner, who

wants resources for their own sake, likes them because of what one can do with them. And anyway, the Silas Marner syndrome of wanting to have resources but not to use them is uncommon. Since resources virtually by definition are valued as means rather than as ends for their own sake, a theory of distributive justice should at the fundamental level be concerned with what resources enable a person to be or do. This scale could be either subjectivist or perfectionist. The resource holdings of an individual could be measured either by the extent of desire satisfaction they enable her to achieve or by the extent to which they enable her to reach objectively valuable states of affairs. Both the subjectivist and the perfectionist options run into difficulties, but whichever way we go at this juncture, resources drop out of the picture of what fundamentally matters for distributive justice.

Comparisons are alienating The claim is that we should not care about equality of condition because no one should care, except instrumentally, how his condition compares to that of others. I defer consideration of this issue until later.

Sufficiency for all is morally important whereas equality among all is not According to the doctrine of sufficiency, what is morally important is not that everyone should have the same but that as many as possible should have enough. But how much is 'enough'? The examples cited above appeal to the thought that the project of enabling people to rise above dire poverty is a matter of greater moral urgency than the project of enabling everyone to have the same whatever her level of affluence. But a person who has risen above dire poverty could still do much better. As Frankfurt defines *sufficiency*, a person attains this level only when she is content with what she has and would not actively seek more. If there is any level at which it would be reasonable for a person to be content and not seek more, this sufficiency-marking level will surely be high – far above the barely beyond poverty level. But then one cannot appeal to the great moral urgency of lifting people above dire poverty to demonstrate the moral urgency of bringing it about that everyone has enough, for the sufficiency level and the just above poverty level are unlikely to coincide for any individual. If attaining sufficiency is morally important that cannot be because escaping poverty is morally important.

There may also be a problem about continuity for the doctrine of sufficiency. If the doctrine of sufficiency holds that getting people just to the sufficiency level is important but moving them beyond that level is unimportant, that would seem to attach undue weight to a tiny gain from a point just on one side of a line as compared to a tiny gain to a point just past the line. Assume that the level of sufficiency is calculated in welfare terms and that Smith's sufficiency level is judged to be 100. The doctrine of sufficiency would seem to be committed to saying that moving Smith from 99.99 to 100 is a morally weighty matter whereas moving Smith from 100 to 100.01 is a trivial matter. This view seems arbitrary. However, this result could be avoided by a function that weights the moral value of gains so that in the neighbourhood of the sufficiency line (on either side) gains matter more, with the weight gradually tapering off as one moves away from the sufficiency line. So the continuity objection against the doctrine of sufficiency is not decisive.

According to Frankfurt, an individual has enough at the point at which she is content with what she has, and reasonably would not actively seek more. But perhaps

a reasonable person would always seek ever more. If so, the doctrine of sufficiency as interpreted by Frankfurt sets no upper bound to reasonable seeking. The doctrine of sufficiency is supposed to be counterposed to a maximizing view of rationality (Slote, 1989). Instead of seeking to maximize one's benefits, a rational person (insofar as she seeks her own self-interest) according to the sufficiency doctrine might seek a moderate amount deemed to be satisfactory and be content with that. But in order to get clear on the difference between a maximizing conception of rationality and a sufficiency conception, one should note that the decision not to seek further gains can be part of a maximizing strategy. The gains might be associated with costs such that there is no net gain from further seeking. Or the reach for gain might also carry a risk of losses, such that one maximizes expected utility by forgoing the reach for gain. A satisficing strategy (seek a satisfactory level of gain and do not search further for more) can be a maximizing strategy in circumstances where any further stretch for more carries a loss of expected utility. Moreover, viewing a policy of moderation as a maximizing strategy solves the problem of how one might non-arbitrarily set the 'satisfactory' or 'sufficiency' level: the level is to be set at a level that maximizes expected gain.

Once we observe the need to distinguish a genuine doctrine of sufficiency or moderation from moderation or satisficing as a means to maximization in certain circumstances, we see that the doctrine of sufficiency is committed to the following. For each individual one can determine a level of benefit such that with her aims, the individual should reasonably be content with this level and not seek more. Even if the individual could certainly secure a large net gain for herself by taking action, the individual would be reasonable to forgo such action on the ground that what she has already suffices. For example, I have been looking for a house that is by the beach, large, and visually attractive, and I have determined that finding a house with any two of these desirable features would suffice. I have located such a house and am satisfied with it, but before I conclude a deal for a sale an agent who knows my tastes perfectly informs me that a house with all three desirable features is available at the same price on the same terms. The first house suffices, the second house is better, and the cost of making a deal and the risk that no deal can be reached are the same for the first house and the second. The doctrine of sufficiency is committed to the claim that in some cases that fit this description the individual would be reasonable to take the first house rather than the second because the first house suffices. On a maximizing view, taking less when one could get more is irrational.

As the doctrine of sufficiency is described, it becomes decreasingly clear why attaining the level of sufficiency should always be a matter of special moral urgency. Suppose that there are three groups of individuals, very poor, poor and well off, and that all individuals within each group happen to have goals such that the level of sufficiency is the same for all of them. Suppose that we could either move the very poor group to the poor level, where none will attain the level of sufficiency, or we could move an equal number of well-off individuals to a level of sufficiency for each of them. I don't see that helping the very poor should have lesser priority than helping the well off even though only helping the well off in these circumstances will thin the ranks of those who do not have enough. For example, it is consistent with the terms of the example set so far that more utility is gained overall if the very poor are helped than if the well off are enabled to gain sufficiency. Consider also a second example. We can choose either to move the

very poor group to the poor level or with the same resources we can move the well-off group far past sufficiency to the bliss level, which we may assume to be far past sufficiency on a utility scale. Suppose that in the second example enormously more utility is produced by raising the better off to bliss than by raising the very poor up the ladder a bit. So in this case, I submit, choosing to help the better off might well be morally preferable to helping the very poor, given the disparity in the gains each group would get from the help we could give. In neither example does the 'sufficiency' level, even supposing it can be defined coherently and determined non-arbitrarily, provide any special reasons for choosing to help one set of potential beneficiaries rather than another.

I conclude this section by summarizing the discussion: three aspects of Frankfurt's attack on the ideal of equality of condition have been distinguished. The objection that resource egalitarianism is fetishistic is well taken, but leaves other versions of the equality of condition ideal unscathed. A second objection is that any doctrine of distributive justice that attaches intrinsic importance to comparisons among persons' holdings is alienating. I have set this aside for now. A third objection claims that egalitarianism should be rejected in favour of a superior rival, the doctrine of sufficiency. I have tried to rebut this objection by casting doubt on the adequacy of the doctrine of sufficiency.

Equality versus Pareto

Equality of condition conflicts with the Pareto norm, which many view as a minimally controversial and highly plausible fairness requirement.

Consider the version of equality of condition that holds: everyone should have the same amount of goods (according to the most appropriate measure of 'goods'). Following Joseph Raz (1986, pp. 225–7), we can state the principle in these other words: if anyone is to have some amount of goods, everyone should have the same amount. In a context where lumpy (not continuously divisible) goods are to be distributed, this principle of strict equality dictates wastage or destruction of goods. If there are three exquisite marble statues to be distributed among four persons, the only distribution consistent with equality is that no person gets any statues. As Douglas Rae and his associates (1981, p. 129) comment, reflecting on this implication of equality, 'Equality itself is as well pleased by graveyards as by vineyards.'

Another equally familiar example involves the distribution of goods to persons when the distribution we enforce now will affect people's incentives to behave and thus the distribution that will come about later. In the familiar image, how a pie is distributed now can affect the size of the pie that will be produced later. If society offers superior remuneration for superior performance, those capable of superior performance will be given an incentive to produce it. Remuneration schemes that elicit higher productivity can produce gains for everyone over an extent of time compared to the baseline of equal distribution.

The principle of strict equality holds that the equality it recommends should be upheld (1) even when unequal distribution would render everyone better off, and (2) even when unequal distribution would render someone better off and no one worse off. In the face of these implications, one might temper advocacy of equality by holding that

equality should have lesser priority than the Pareto norm. A state of affairs is Pareto optimal when it is not possible to change it by making someone better off without making anyone worse off. A state of affairs is Pareto suboptimal when it is possible to change it by making someone better off without making anyone worse off. The Pareto norm simply holds that principles of distributive justice must not recommend Pareto suboptimal distributions.

The Pareto norm appears to express a minimal and rather uncontroversial notion of fairness: if one can make someone better off without making anyone else worse off, why not do so? Sometimes the idea of Pareto optimality is construed in terms of utility or desire satisfaction: a state of affairs is Pareto optimal when no one's level of desire satisfaction can be increased without decreasing someone else's level of desire satisfaction. When the idea of Pareto optimality is so construed, it can be challenged by imagining cases in which someone's desires are perverse or degraded, and querying why matters are improved when someone's perverse or degraded desires are better satisfied. But this challenge reflects doubt that someone is always better off whenever their level of desire satisfaction is increased, not a challenge to the idea of Pareto optimality or the Pareto norm *per se*.

The Pareto norm as stated at the end of the last but one paragraph is ambiguous. When the ambiguity is removed, the Pareto norm takes a less controversial and a more controversial form. First, notice that *Pareto optimality* is defined in terms of what is possible in principle. In practice, the achievement of Pareto-optimal or -efficient outcomes may be unfeasible. We can imagine a possible improvement but cannot achieve it. Second, the Pareto norm can be given a weak and a strong formulation. The weak Pareto norm holds that principles of distributive justice should not recommend outcomes from which it is feasible to effect a Pareto improvement. The strong Pareto norm holds that principles of distributive justice should not recommend outcomes from which it is in principle possible to effect a Pareto improvement, whether or not such improvement is feasible. The weak Pareto norm is less controversial, the strong Pareto norm more so.

To illustrate the difference: suppose that raising the incomes of the poor is a goal of equity and that to achieve this goal an income tax is instituted. The income tax will distort taxpayers' leisure versus income decisions and hence inevitably produce inefficiency. If we do all we can to pick the policy that results in the least efficiency that is compatible with achieving the equity goal, the policy is a constrained Pareto optimum and the weak Pareto norm is satisfied. But the strong Pareto norm tells us not to select any outcome off the Pareto frontier. Restricting the policy choice in this way may not allow any movement at all in the direction of satisfying the equity goal, given that any move toward equity inevitably involves some inefficiency. In general, the strong Pareto norm is a very demanding principle that many will reject. The weak Pareto norm says that other things being equal, achieving Pareto optimality is desirable. The strong Pareto norm says that the goal of achieving Pareto optimality should take absolute priority over all other values.

The principle of strict equality conflicts with the strong, not the weak, Pareto norm. So if one's response to the conflict between Pareto optimality and equality is to give equality no weight at all in conflict with Pareto, my hunch is that the explanation of this response is likely to be that one gives little or no weight to equality *per se* (contrary

to what one might initially have supposed). After all, where a fairness or equity requirement that elicits strong allegiance conflicts with the strong Pareto norm, the committed will dig in their heels: 'So much the worse for efficiency.'

A commitment to adherence to the norm of strict equality when it conflicts with the Pareto norm need not involve complete indifference to the level of human welfare or well-being at which equality is sustained. For instance, one might opt for the view that equality should be always sustained at the highest feasible level of welfare for all. This view might be motivated by the background beliefs that (1) people's welfare should be proportional to their personal deservingness, and (2) no one ever really is more deserving than another person because the achievements and dispositions that are cited as evidence of superior deservingness always turn out under examination to be determined by features of inheritance and favourable socialization for which the supposedly deserving individual can take no credit. So everyone's deservingness is always the same as anyone else's and if people are to be rewarded according to their deservingness their rewards should always be exactly equal. But what is odd about these background beliefs is the combination of the thoughts that the conditions of differential deservingness among persons are never met and that deservingness still matters morally a great deal.

Equality versus tilting towards the worse off

If you give lexical priority to the Pareto norm over the principle of strict equality, my suggestion is that this ranking reveals that equality *per se* matters little or not at all to you. One possibility worth exploring is that the commitment to egalitarianism is not a matter of favouring equality *per se* but a matter of giving priority to the worst off. Parfit (1990) explores the differences between these and related moral norms.

It is instructive to observe how giving priority to the interests of the worse off might readily be conflated with valuing equality of condition for its own sake when the task is to distribute a fixed stock of goods. Suppose that we have on hand a fixed stock of the good X, which can be divided as finely as one pleases. X is intrinsically valuable, not merely valuable as a means to further goods, and the morally appropriate distribution of X is thought to be desirable for its own sake and not merely as a means to achieving a distribution of some further good. There are N individuals in society and for each of them, the more of X one has, the better off one is. If the task is to distribute X according to one's moral values, the goal of equal distribution and the goal of doing as well as one can for the worst off both recommend the same choice of distribution: divide X so that each of the N persons has an equal share, a $1/N$ share. Indeed, not only a strict leximin priority for the worst off recommends equal division; any rule that assigns even slightly greater weight to the worst off as against everyone else would recommend equal division.

The differences between literal equality and priority to the worst off only emerge into view when one considers examples in which how one distributes a stock of goods affects aggregate production of the final good whose distribution is the object of moral concern. Consider a simple two-period example in which the pattern of distribution in the first period affects the amount to be distributed as well as the pattern of distribution in the second period. Imagine that society can choose between just two distributions: one

which yields an equal distribution of utility for all persons summed across the two periods, and another distribution, which induces able individuals to produce more in the first period by offering a reward of high consumption in the second period for high production in the first period. In the second distribution there is inequality of utility but everyone is better off under this distribution than they would be under the equal distribution rule. In this example the norm of equalizing utility favours the equal distribution choice while the norm of maximizing utility giving priority to the worst off favours the unequal distribution because the worst off do better under inequality than under the regime of equality. Equality is only instrumentally valuable from the perspective of the norm of giving priority to the interests of the worst off.

This tilting conception of egalitarianism is given a specific expression in John Rawls's difference principle, the maximin norm (Rawls, 1971). Thomas Nagel (1979, pp. 117–18) offers this characterization of the general idea: 'The essential feature of an egalitarian priority system is that it counts improvements to the welfare of the worse off as more urgent than improvements to the welfare of the better off.' The idea of giving priority to the worse off is of course independent of the issue of whether one measures individual positions in terms of welfare, resources, functionings or some further alternative, but let that pass. If in pairwise competition one always favours the worse off, one ultimately favours the worst off, so Nagel continues: 'What makes a system egalitarian is the priority it gives to the claims of those whose overall life prospects put them at the bottom, irrespective of numbers or of overall utility.' Notice that the last phrase quoted from Nagel introduces a quite new idea: to the proposal to favour the least advantaged is now conjoined the much stronger requirement of lexical priority – a prohibition against trade-offs between the advantage of the least well off and the better off. But in the general case the maximin injunction to give lexical priority to the interests of the worst off in any conflict with the interests of better-off individuals is implausible. Maximin implies that if one's choices are limited to keeping the status quo or altering it by subtracting a penny from the holdings of the worst off so as to gain a million dollars for the second worst off, the status quo should be retained. Few would ratify such an extreme weighting. It would be better to examine Nagel's interpretation of egalitarianism separately from the issue of the appropriateness of lexical priority.

Let us say that a *tilting* conception of egalitarianism is one that assigns greater moral weight (as specified in the next sentence) to achieving same-sized gains or preventing same-sized losses for those persons who rank worse off than others on an ordinal scale. According to a tilting conception, the comparative moral urgency of bringing about a same-sized gain for one person as opposed to another is determined, so far as egalitarianism is concerned, entirely by their ordinal ranking. The worst off is given priority over the second worst off, who in turn is given priority over the third worst off, and so on. The comparative weighting, the degree of tilting towards the interests of the worse off, is a matter that this definition leaves open: this can vary from the extreme weighting of a maximin principle to a principle that accords just marginally greater urgency to gains for the worse off (such a principle would be barely distinguishable in its recommendations from a straight aggregate maximizing principle).

Tilting conceptions including Rawlsian maximin regard the moral urgency of achieving a benefit of a given size for a given person as a function solely of the ranking

that identifies how well off the person is by comparison with others (so long as the benefit to be conferred does not alter the comparative rankings). What counts is only whether the person is worst off, second worst off, and so on. The absolute amount of the gap that separates individuals at these various benefit levels does not have any bearing on the issue of moral urgency. But the information that tilting conceptions bid us ignore in deciding on our course of action is plainly relevant.

To illustrate the problem, consider the issue of the moral value of conferring a very small welfare gain on either the best-off or the worst-off member of society under two conditions, great inequality and approximate equality. Under great inequality the gap between worst off and best off is enormous, say 1000 on a welfare scale. Under approximate equality the distribution of welfare has been compressed so that there is only a very slight difference, say two units, between the welfare levels enjoyed by the best off and the worst off. Tilting principles will not find these two conditions morally distinguishable. Exactly the same priority will be assigned to aiding the worst off in the two conditions. But I submit that whether we confer a welfare gain on the best off or the worst off is intuitively a matter of grave urgency when the gap between top and bottom is very great and a morally inconsiderable matter when the gap between top and bottom is very small. Moreover, it is not just the absolute value of the gap between top and bottom welfare levels that is decisive for judgements ranking the moral urgency of giving aid to better off or worse off, but also the absolute value of the welfare level enjoyed by the worse off. (An absolute gap of 8 between the welfare levels of top and bottom might qualify as a great gap if the initial welfare level of the worst off is zero yet would qualify as a small gap if the initial welfare level enjoyed by the worst off is 1000 on the same scale.)

It is implausible to suppose that only ordinal welfare rankings determine the moral value of conferring a gain of a given size on a person. Consider instead the thought that comparison of any sort is a secondary phenomenon in determining the value of conferring a gain on a person. This is the thought raised by Frankfurt above (1987, p. 498). Consider this principle: the moral value of achieving a welfare gain of a given size (or preventing the loss of a given size) for a person is greater, the lower is that person's cardinal welfare level (Weirich, 1983). This principle is not essentially comparative, as we can see by noting that it has implications for a one-person Robinson Crusoe world. (Suppose that there are two moral principles that should guide Crusoe: respect the natural environment for its own sake, and increase your welfare. The principle we are considering tells Crusoe that the higher his welfare becomes, the more weight he should give to respecting the environment.) But of course, in cases where we have to choose between helping one of several persons, the principle (once rendered determinate in content) would provide a basis for comparison that would determine the moral urgency of helping one rather than another.

Conclusion

One lesson of this chapter is that equality of life prospects is an elusive ideal. Versions of it abound. The indefiniteness of this egalitarian ideal tends to obscure the issue of its attractiveness. My hunch is that for many persons (including myself) who regard

themselves as egalitarians, the content of this concern has nothing to do with favouring equality *per se* or even with giving priority to the worse off. The underlying value that supports equality sometimes and giving priority to the worst off often is the idea that the moral benefit of conferring a given benefit on a person is greater, the worse off the person is prior to receipt of this benefit. But whether or not one happens to agree with this thought, it should be agreed that the extent to which it is rational to endorse the norm of equality cannot be determined until equality is distinguished from priority to the worse off and other, different values with which it might be conflated. 'How could it not be an evil that some people's life prospects at birth are radically inferior to others?' Nagel (1991, p. 28) asks. But in fact, Nagel agrees with Rawls that to the extent that these inequalities were found to be maximally productive for those who suffer inferior prospects, the inequalities would not be morally regrettable.

The displacement of equality by other moral ideals can seem disquieting. In the writings of several of the authors canvassed in this survey one can discern in those who reject some versions of equality a tendency to cast about for some sort of equality that can be embraced as intrinsically morally desirable. Rejecting simple equality, Walzer endorses complex equality (whatever that is). Rejecting any ideal of equality of condition prescribing equal distribution of some good to all members of society, Miller (1990) endorses equality of status, which is stipulated as holding just in case every citizen regards herself as fundamentally the equal of every other citizen. (This ideal could be met in a hierarchical feudal or *laissez-faire* capitalist society all of whose members are Christian and regard each other as equally loved by God and so fundamentally equals.)

Even Ronald Dworkin, who at least tentatively appears to endorse equality of resources as a distributive ideal, regards a commitment to equality of resources as flowing from a commitment to a more abstract and more fundamental political ideal of treating all citizens as equals. Government has 'an abstract responsibility to treat each citizen's fate as equally important' (1986, p. 296). According to this abstract conception of equality, 'the interests of each member of the community matter, and matter equally' (Kymlicka, 1990, p. 4). Abstract equality is also said to require the government to treat all citizens with equal concern. In response: these formulations are not equivalent to one another. Different notions are being bandied about under the heading of 'abstract equality'. Roughly, what the ideal of abstract equality appears to come to is non-discrimination or impartiality: a government should not arbitrarily discriminate in its treatment of one citizen versus another, but should impartially treat all citizens in a principled way. The interests of any citizen should weigh the same as any other in government policy, according to whatever function mapping interests to policy is entailed by correct principles. Without further substantive moral premisses this abstract 'equality' does not imply egalitarian treatment of citizens in any substantive sense. If Dworkin ends up endorsing any conception of equality of life prospects, that posture cannot be supported by interpreting abstract equality. No amount of interpretation of a non-egalitarian premiss will imply a substantively egalitarian principle without the addition of substantive moral premisses. The rhetoric of 'interpretation' and of rendering 'abstract' equality more 'concrete' can only serve to obscure exactly what those premisses might be and what reasons might support them.

CHAPTER N I N E

Illuminating Egalitarianism*

Larry S. Temkin

The goal of this article is modest. It is simply to help illuminate the nature of egalitarianism. More particularly, I aim to show what certain egalitarians are committed to, and to suggest, though certainly not *prove*, that equality, as these egalitarians understand it, is an important normative ideal that cannot simply be ignored in moral deliberations.

The article is divided into six main sections. In section I, I distinguish between different kinds of egalitarian positions, and indicate the type of egalitarianism with which I am concerned. In section II, I discuss the relations between equality, fairness, luck, and responsibility. In section III, I make several methodological points regarding the equality of what debate. In section IV, I defend egalitarianism against rival views that focus on subsistence, sufficiency, or compassion. In section V, I introduce prioritarianism, and defend egalitarianism against the leveling down objection. In section VI, I illustrate egalitarianism's distinct appeal, in contrast to prioritarianism's. I end with a brief conclusion.

I. Distinguishing Different Kinds of Egalitarianism

Numerous quite distinct positions – ranging from utilitarianism, to libertarianism, to Rawls's maximin principle – have been described as, or perhaps conflated with, versions of egalitarianism. But, 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. In this section, I distinguish several egalitarian positions, and clarify 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 tall people should be well off, and all short people badly off, 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 the conception of equality as impartiality that 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.¹

While all plausible moral theories are committed to equality as universality and impartiality, *equality as comparability* reflects a different, and I believe 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 believe 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 means to* 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.

We might further distinguish between *person-affecting* versions of egalitarianism, according to which inequality only matters insofar as it adversely affects people; and *impersonal* versions, according to which inequality can matter even when it doesn't adversely affect people. Similarly, we can distinguish between *deontic*-egalitarianism, which focuses on duties to address the legitimate complaints of victims of inequality by improving their situations; and *telic*-egalitarianism, which focuses on removing objectionable inequalities as a means of improving the goodness of outcomes. Deontic-egalitarianism focuses on assessing agents or actions, so unavoidable inequalities for which no one was responsible do not matter; whereas telic-egalitarianism focuses on the goodness of outcomes, so such inequalities may matter.²

With these distinctions in mind, I want to stress that my concern in this article is with equality as comparability, understood as a substantive version of non-instrumental egalitarianism. As I present and develop this position, it is an impersonal, telic version of egalitarianism.

Finally, let me emphasize that egalitarians are pluralists. No reasonable egalitarian believes that equality is *all* that matters. But they believe that it matters *some*. Thus, for the egalitarian, equality is only one important ideal, among others, including, perhaps, freedom, utility, perfection, and justice.³

II. Equality, Fairness, Luck, and Responsibility

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 Cohen, Dworkin, and Arneson, have been identified as so-called *luck egalitarians*.⁴ 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.⁵ 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, as well as most of 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 a fully responsible criminal is worse off than a law-abiding citizen, even if the criminal

craftily avoided capture, and so is only worse off because, through no fault or choice of his own, a falling 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 supererogatorily, 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.⁶

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.

Some luck egalitarians distinguish between *option luck*, luck to which we responsibly open ourselves, and *brute luck*, luck that simply “befalls” us, unbidden.⁷ This distinction's advocates believe that any option luck inequalities that result from people autonomously choosing to gamble, or invest in the stock market, are unobjectionable. By contrast, brute luck inequalities that result from some being born with less intelligence, or to poorer parents, or some being struck down by lightning, or an accident, are objectionable.

I reject the way the option/brute luck distinction is typically invoked. In part, this is because drawing the line between them is difficult. But more importantly, I believe that it *is* objectionable if Mary takes a prudent risk, and John an imprudent one, yet Mary fares much worse than John, because she is the victim of bad, and he the beneficiary of good, option luck. Likewise, if Mary and John are equally deserving, and choose similar options, but John ends up much better off than Mary, because he enjoys vastly greater option luck, I believe there *is* an egalitarian objection to the situation. As with paradigmatic cases involving brute luck, in such a case Mary ends up much worse off than John, though she is in no way less deserving than he. This seems to me patently unfair. It is a case of *comparative* unfairness to which my kind of egalitarian should, I think, object.

This discussion is relevant to many practical issues of public policy. *If* it is true that people can have personal responsibility for their actions in a way that is compatible with a meaningful conception of desert – and I should stress that this is a big “if”, but one that many accept, and that I shall assume in the rest of this discussion – then for the reasons suggested above not *all* substantive inequalities will involve comparative unfairness, and hence be objectionable from an egalitarian standpoint. This position has deep and important implications for the nature and extent of our obligations towards the less fortunate whose predicaments resulted from their own fully responsible choices. This might include conditions resulting from individually responsible choices involving job selection, lifestyle, risky behavior, and so on.

Clearly, the scope of this issue is too large to deal adequately with it here, but let me just make five relevant points. First, the starting point of our discussion is that the mere fact that some are much worse off than others, does *not* mean that there is an *egalitarian* reason to aid them. There is an egalitarian reason to aid someone

if her situation is *unfair* relative to others, and whether this is so or not will surely depend on facts of individual responsibility pertinent to the case.

Second, even if there is no *egalitarian* reason to aid someone who is needy, there are many powerful normative considerations that may dictate our doing so. These may include maximin or prioritarian considerations that speak in favor of giving special weight to those who are poorly off, humanitarian considerations to ease pain and suffering, utilitarian reasons to promote the general welfare, virtue-related reasons of compassion, mercy, beneficence, and forgiveness, and so on. As noted above, egalitarians are rightly committed to pluralism, and we have to be sensitive to the full range of reasons for aiding the needy that having nothing to do with considerations of comparative fairness.

But third, where the other morally relevant factors are equal, or even sufficiently close, egalitarian reasons of comparative fairness may well help determine who among the needy has the strongest moral claim on scarce resources. So, for example, if one *has* to choose between who gets the last available bed in the ICU unit, perhaps it ought to go to the innocent pedestrian who was struck by a drunk driver, rather than the person who was driving drunk.

Fourth, from the standpoint of comparative fairness, it is crucial that one determine appropriate comparison classes, so that one is comparing all relevant types of behavior in the same way. For example, it would be objectionable to downgrade the medical claims of AIDS patients who engaged in unprotected sex, if one wasn't similarly prepared to downgrade the medical claims of pregnant women who engaged in unprotected sex, or perhaps obese stroke victims who did nothing to curb their indulgence of food.

Finally, in accordance with the point about option luck noted above, it is important from the standpoint of comparative fairness, that one not merely compare the "losers" of those who make poor choices with the "winners" of those who make good choices, but that, in addition, one compare the winners and losers of *both* categories with each other. Most smokers don't develop lung cancer, most people who overeat don't have a stroke, and most helmetless motorcyclists don't end up in the emergency room. Thus, from the standpoint of comparative fairness, it is important to bear in mind that full responsibility for one's choices doesn't automatically translate into full responsibility for one's predicament. Indeed, as Kant rightly saw, the two are only loosely, and coincidentally, connected. Correspondingly, consideration of equality as comparative fairness requires that we pay attention not only to *actual* outcomes, but to considerations of expected utility. More particularly, considerations of comparative fairness will require that we pay attention to the extent to which different people end up better and worse off than the expected value of their choices. Unfortunately, I cannot pursue these issues here.

III. Equality of What?

Many egalitarians have debated the following question: insofar as we are egalitarians, what *kind* of equality should we seek. A host of candidates have been championed, including, among others: income, resources, primary goods, wealth, power, welfare, opportunity, needs satisfaction, capabilities, functionings, rights, and liberties. It is

difficult to exaggerate the importance of this topic, since equality of one kind will often *require* inequality of another. For example, equality of income may correlate with *inequality* of need satisfaction between the handicapped and the healthy, and vice versa.

I shall not try to offer a particular substantive answer to the “equality of what?” question. However, I shall make several observations pertinent to this topic.

I begin with a methodological remark. Philosophers favoring different conceptions of what kind of equality matters have gone to great lengths illustrating cases where rival conceptions have implausible implications. These philosophers seem to assume that such considerations provide good reason for rejecting the rival conceptions. Moreover, many seem to implicitly assume that concern for one kind of equality rules out concern for others. Unfortunately, on a pluralistic view of morality, to which *all* reasonable egalitarians are committed, such assumptions are dubious.

Elsewhere, I have pointed out that the fact that ideals like equality, utility, or freedom sometimes have implausible, or even terrible, implications, does *not* show that those ideals do not matter. It merely shows that each ideal, alone, is not *all* that matters.⁸ Likewise, the fact that different conceptions of what kind of equality matters sometimes have implausible implications does not necessarily show that those conceptions do not matter. Equality, like morality itself, is complex. And more than one conception may be relevant to our “all things considered” egalitarian judgments. Perhaps different kinds of equality matter in different contexts. Or perhaps even in the same context there are strong reasons for promoting different kinds of equality. Thus, the “equality of what?” question may have several plausible answers.

My own view is that a large component of the egalitarian’s concern should be with equality of *welfare*; but as I use it “welfare” is a technical term that needs to be interpreted broadly, and with great care. It must appropriately include, among other things, most of the elements that Amartya Sen carefully distinguishes in his sophisticated account of functionings, capability sets, freedom, agency, and well-being.⁹ However, I also think the egalitarian should give weight to equality of opportunity.

Suppose, for example, that we lived in a world not too unlike the actual one, in which a relatively small percentage of people were very well off, while the vast majority were much worse off. Concern for equality of welfare would impel us to raise everyone to the level of the best-off. But suppose, given limited resources, this were not possible. Concern for equality of welfare might then impel us to redistribute from the better-off to the worse-off. But if the percentage of better-off were small, this might do little to improve the worse-off, its main effect might be to reduce the better-off to the level of the worse-off. Even if we think this *would* be an improvement regarding equality of welfare, we *might* agree it would *not* be an improvement all things considered, and in any event it might not be politically feasible. Thus, we might conclude that in such a case we must accept, even if not happily, a significantly unequal situation regarding welfare.

Still, we might distinguish two versions of this scenario. In one version, the better-off group are members of a hereditary aristocracy. They, and their descendants, have been guaranteed a place in the better-off group. Likewise, the members of the worse-off group, and their descendants, are destined to remain in the worse-off group regardless of their abilities or efforts. In a second version, there is genuine equality of opportunity. At birth, each person, and his or her descendants, has an equal chance of ending up in the better-off group.

By hypothesis, the two versions of the scenario are equivalent regarding equality of welfare. Yet, I think most would agree that the second is better than the first all things considered, and better largely, if not wholly, because it is better regarding equality of opportunity. I think, then, that *qua* egalitarian, one should care about equality of opportunity. But this concern should be *in addition to*, rather than *in place of*, a concern for equality of welfare. The second situation may be *perfect* regarding equality of opportunity – but it still involves many people who are worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own, in a way that involves comparative unfairness. The egalitarian, *qua* egalitarian, will regard this as objectionable. It would be better, regarding equality, if, in addition to everyone having equal *opportunities*, those equally deserving actually fared equally well.

Equality of opportunity plays a crucial role in debates about rationing. In the face of scarce resources, where not all needs can be met, what system will ensure that among those who are equally needy and deserving, everyone at least has an equal opportunity to have their needs met? Note, there may be different ways of fully or partially satisfying the ideal of equality of opportunity. And of course, here, as elsewhere, there will be other moral ideals that compete with the ideal of equality of opportunity, or provide reasons for fully or partially satisfying it one way rather than another.

The preceding considerations are relevant to several related topics, such as whether we should be concerned about *ex ante* equality – equality in people's *prospects* concerning the lives they might lead – or *ex post* equality – equality in *outcomes* concerning the actual lives that people end up leading; and similarly, whether the egalitarian's concern should be mainly with *procedural* fairness, or with some more robust outcome-related conception of *substantive* fairness, according to which an outcome that resulted from a perfectly fair procedure, might nonetheless be substantively unfair, and require amelioration. These topics raise a host of complex issues, that cannot be adequately dealt with here; but let me give a sense for my view of these topics, and offer a few examples that help illustrate my reasoning.

First, just as I think one should care about both equality of opportunity and equality of welfare (broadly construed), so I think that for similar reasons one should care about both *ex ante* and *ex post* equality, and also about both procedural fairness and a more robust outcome-related conception of substantive fairness. In some cases, perhaps, *ex ante* equality, or procedural fairness, will be all that is realizable, and in others our main concern might be with *ex post*, or substantive fairness. But in fact, in certain circumstances the two will be intimately related. So, for example, it is arguable that under certain circumstances, whatever outcome results from a situation that meets sufficiently demanding criteria for *ex ante* equality, or procedural fairness, will, in fact, also be guaranteed to meet the most plausible conception of *ex post* equality, or substantive fairness. Moreover, it is also arguable that under certain circumstances, no coherent account can be given of what *ex post* equality, or substantive fairness demands, independently of certain favorable conditions initially obtaining that would at least partially satisfy the criteria for *ex ante* equality or procedural fairness.

I cannot fully defend these claims here, but let me offer some observations to help illuminate them.

Egalitarians recognize that in the game of life, each of us, to some extent, must play the cards we are dealt. But they also recognize that sometimes our cards are both dealt to us, and played for us. On this analogy, the concern for *ex ante* equality,

and procedural fairness, reflects the concern that the deck should not be stacked against certain players, and that there should be no cheating in the play of the hand. So, minimally, the egalitarian wants each person's hand to be determined by a fair deal and fairly played. If, for example, the deck is stacked in favor of whites or men, so that they are always dealt aces and kings, while blacks or women are always dealt deuces and treys, that situation will be patently unfair, and it can be rightly criticized from the standpoint of ex ante equality, or procedural fairness. Likewise, it will be unfair if the cards are dealt fairly, but unfairly played; if, for example, whites or males are allowed to look at the hands of blacks or women, before deciding what cards to play.

Ensuring that each person's hand will be determined by a fair deal and played fairly ensures that, in advance of the deal, the *expected value* of each hand is the same, and we can say that that meets an important criterion for ex ante equality, or procedural fairness. But surely, the egalitarian wants more than just a fair deal and a fair play, since, by itself, this would do nothing to preclude the result that some people will be dealt aces and kings, while others, no less deserving, will be dealt deuces and treys. That is, in the game of life, the cards don't have to be *stacked* against particular groups or individuals for it to still *turn out* that some are born with extraordinary advantages, and hence extraordinary life prospects, relative to others. For the egalitarian, this is deeply unfair, even if, in an important sense, it is not *as* unfair as such a situation would have been had it resulted from a stacked deck of bias or discrimination.

The preceding suggests that the egalitarian not only wants the *deal* to be fair, he wants, as it were, each *hand* to be fair. That is, he does not merely want the expected value of each hand to be the same in *advance* of each deal, he wants the expected value of each hand to be the same *after* the deal. Thus, it should not only be that *in advance* of bringing a child into the world, one can reasonably expect the expected value of its life to be as good as anyone else's, but rather that any child that is actually brought into the world should face a constellation of natural and social circumstances that give its life prospects an expected value as good as anyone else's. Notice, this view reflects a concern that in one way resembles an ex post view – since it seeks equality in people's life prospects after the deal, as it were. But in another way it resembles an ex ante view – since it focuses on the expected value of people's life *prospects*, rather than the outcome that will result when the hand is actually played, which is to say the value of the lives that the people actually end up *leading*. For my purposes, I shall count such a view as setting further requirements on the criteria that must be met for ex ante equality, or procedural fairness, to be fully satisfied.

But these criteria need further strengthening. To see this, let us develop our card analogy a bit. Suppose that each person is to be dealt four cards, each of which represents a possible life that someone might lead. Suppose further that one of these cards will be selected at random. If an ace is selected, someone will lead a very high quality life with a value of 20,000, if an eight is selected someone will lead a moderately high quality life of value 10,000, and if a deuce is selected someone will lead a very poor quality life of value 0. Now suppose that in outcome A each member of a large population has been dealt four cards. And suppose that as a result of a completely fair deal, involving many decks, half the population has been dealt two aces

and two deuces, while the other half has been dealt four eights. Here, we meet the initial criteria that prior to the deal the expected value of each life is the same, and we further meet the additional criteria that after the deal the expected value of each life is the same, namely 10,000. Still, although the *expected values* of their lives are the same, it is clear that some people in A face significantly different life prospects. Those who have been dealt four eights face the certainty of a life of value 10,000, and the statistically near certain outcome of ending up in their society's middle-off group.¹⁰ Those who have been dealt aces and twos, face the equal probability that they will end up with a life of value 20,000 or a life of value 0, and it is certain that they will either end up in their society's best-off group, or its worst-off group. Hence, whatever happens, it is *certain* that those who were dealt different kinds of cards will lead significantly different kinds of lives of significantly different value.

Contrast outcome A with outcome B, where, *everyone* is dealt four eights, and hence faces the certain prospect of living a life of value 10,000, or outcome C, where, *everyone* is dealt two aces and two deuces, and hence faces an equal probability of living a life of value 20,000 or a life of value 0. Clearly, there is a respect in which each person's overall life prospects are the same in B, and similarly in C, but not in A. I believe that the respect in which this is so reflects an important element of what one should care about insofar as one cares about ex ante equality, or procedural fairness. Arguably, from the standpoint of ex ante equality, or procedural fairness, B and C are both perfect. One should be indifferent between them, and, each should be preferred to A.

If right, the preceding suggests that insofar as one cares about ex ante equality, or procedural fairness, one should not merely be concerned with the *expected value* of different lives, either in advance of their coming to be, or even at birth. Rather, for each kind of life, L, with value V, that someone faces at birth with probability p, it will be desirable if everyone else, at birth, also faces a kind of life, L', with probability p, that also has value V. Note, this position does *not* commit one to the kind of radical egalitarian position that Kurt Vonnegut Jr. skewered in his notoriously anti-egalitarian diatribe "Harrison Bergeron," which would require that everyone face the exact same set of circumstances, and that everyone be exactly the same in all of their characteristics.¹¹ On the view in question, each kind of life, L and L' may differ substantially in all sorts of respects, as long as their *overall* value is the same.

Suppose we fully achieved ex ante equality, or procedural fairness, along the lines suggested above. So, for every two people there would be a one-to-one correspondence of equivalent alternatives involving the different life prospects they faced, the value of those prospects, and their probabilities. In this case, we would have met the egalitarian goal that no one should be disadvantaged relative to another merely by the circumstances surrounding their birth. Still, the egalitarian would want more than this, as such ex ante equality, or procedural fairness, would be compatible with undeserved *ex post* inequality of any size. And egalitarians will object to such inequality precisely when, and because, it involves the substantive, comparative unfairness of some people being worse off than others, though they are no less deserving.

Consider an outcome like C, above. Suppose, at birth, everyone faces one of two prospects with equal probability. Either they will live a very high quality life of value 20,000, or a very low quality life of value 0. Let us assume that this reflects a fair situation, equivalent to each being dealt a fair hand, from a fair deck that has been

fairly shuffled. And suppose that it will be pure chance which kind of life they end up leading, so that no charge of bias or unfairness can be made regarding the “play of the hand” that ultimately determined what kind of life they would lead. Even so, if one assumes that no one is less deserving than anyone else, the egalitarian will regard it as comparatively unfair if half the people end up with lives of value 20,000 and half with lives of value 0. Ex ante equality and procedural fairness may be desirable, but in such circumstances, they are no substitute for ex post equality, or substantive fairness. In such a case, at least, the egalitarian would not be satisfied with the resulting outcome. Instead, she would much prefer the fairer substantive outcome where each person lived a life of value 10,000.

Next, suppose that the game of life was “stacked” so that at birth certain groups had a much greater chance of ending up well off than others. On the analogy we have been using, we can imagine that some people have been unfairly dealt three aces and a deuce, while others have been unfairly dealt three deuces and an ace, but that, as before, what life each person will actually lead will be determined by a random selection of one of her cards. Clearly this would be objectionable from the standpoint of ex ante equality and procedural fairness, and there would be egalitarian reason to try to prevent such unfairness in people’s initial starting points if one could. Still, assuming that neither the advantaged nor disadvantaged were less deserving than the others, if, in fact, both groups of people had aces drawn, so that both ended up living very high quality lives of value 20,000, the egalitarian would see no reason to change the outcome. And similarly, if both groups of people had deuces drawn. If, on the other hand, one of the groups of people had an ace drawn, and the other a deuce, the egalitarian would favor redistribution between the better and worse off *whichever group* was better off. Here, it seems clear that the concern for ex post equality, and substantive fairness, would dictate how the egalitarian would respond to the actual lives people ended up leading, and any concerns she might have about ex ante equality or procedural justice would play no role in that response.

Might the egalitarian simply focus on achieving ex post equality, and not worry about whether or not ex ante equality, or procedural fairness obtains? I think not. Let me make several points regarding this.

First, the concern for ex ante equality and procedural fairness, reflect the view that it not only matters how people *end up*, it matters how they have been *treated*; for example, that they are treated *as equals* so that no one is discriminated against, or otherwise dealt an unfair hand to play. Importantly, it also matters that each person be given a fair start from which to autonomously plan and lead a life of their own choosing, so that each person is significantly responsible for their own lot in life. Moreover, such factors are relevant to telic considerations regarding the goodness of outcomes, and not merely deontic considerations of how people ought to act. Thus, for example, it is not only true that people *ought* to treat people as equals, it is true that treating people as equals is *itself* a good-making feature of outcomes; so that, other things equal, an outcome in which people have been treated as equals is better than one where they have not.

Second, as noted above in discussing equality of opportunity, there may be some cases where ex post equality is unobtainable, or undesirable all things considered, where it would be better, precisely because fairer, if the outcome resulted from an initial situation of ex ante equality, or procedural fairness, than if it didn’t.

Third, ex post equality is itself desirable only when it reflects a situation of comparative fairness. So, as indicated earlier, other things equal, the egalitarian should not prefer an equal outcome in which a fully responsible criminal ended up as well off as a law abiding citizen. Likewise, suppose that John is dealt an initial hand that enables him to live a life ranging in value from 10,000 to 20,000, while Mary is dealt a hand that only enables her to live a life of value from 0 to 10,000. Even if John and Mary end up equally well off, so there is perfect ex post equality, the egalitarian would have good reason to worry that the outcome was comparatively *unfair*. It might well be that Mary, having done her best to take full advantage of every opportunity available to her, ought to end up much better off than John, who may have willingly and knowingly frittered away the abundant opportunities available to him. So, the comparative fairness egalitarian can't just ignore questions of ex ante equality, and procedural fairness, and focus on bringing about outcomes of ex post equality.

But this raises a fourth important issue. One can't simply assume that Mary deserves to be better off than John, based on the extent to which they differed in maximizing their potential. Perhaps if John had been given Mary's initial starting point, he would have acted as Mary in fact did, and similarly for Mary. In that case, perhaps Mary and John deserve to be equally well off after all, despite their completely different, and seemingly unfair, initial starting points. This shows that it may be important to promote ex ante equality and procedural fairness, to ensure that people have sufficiently comparable starting points, in order to make meaningful judgments of comparative fairness.¹² Furthermore, if, contrary to fact, one could ensure that people's initial starting points fully met the robust criteria for ex ante equality and procedural fairness – so, in particular, people had been dealt similar hands in terms of talents, temperament, individual responsibility, and life prospects – and if, in addition, one could later remove or rectify the influence of luck on people's choices – so, ultimately, each person was responsible for how they ended up relative to others; then, of course, the comparative fairness egalitarian *would* be fully satisfied with the outcome, regardless of whether it involved ex post equality, in the sense of people actually ending up equally well off.

Finally, let me conclude this section with another methodological point. There is, I believe, much truth to the maxim that “to a person with a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” So, for example, someone with a bad back is likely to receive a very different treatment depending on whether he goes to a chiropractor, a psychologist, or a back surgeon. Understandably, each of us confronts problems in terms of the models and theories that we have mastered, and which have served us well in other contexts, especially if the problems seem both amenable to analysis, and tractable, in terms of our familiar models and theories.

The point is obvious, but it is important to bear in mind in thinking about the “equality of what” debate. The world is filled with inequalities, and among the starkest of these, of normative significance, are the vast economic inequalities of income and wealth. Correspondingly, many of the brightest minds who have taken up the topic of equality have been economists. Naturally, they have used the powerful tools of economics to assess inequality, and, in fact the problem of inequality seems particularly amenable to analysis, and potentially tractable, when the focus is on economic equality. After all, we have highly developed economic theories that provide precise

ways of identifying and measuring economic inequalities, and that yield solid guidance as to how social and economic policies might be changed to ameliorate such inequalities.

Given all this, it is, perhaps, unsurprising, that while philosophers have defended a wide range of answers to the “equality of what?” question, in the “real world” the battleground of egalitarianism is largely an economic one. Policy makers rely heavily on economists to meaningfully measure disparities in income and wealth, and social policies are devised with the goal of reducing economic disparities. But, as we shall see next, this may be problematic.

Consider the old bromide that if you don’t have your health you don’t have anything. On this view, while it may be better to be rich than poor, it is even more important to be healthy than ill. This view may well express a deep and important truth. Suppose, on reflection, we think it does. This, of course, would have important egalitarian implications. Instead of focusing on improving the lot of the poor, there would be strong reason to focus on improving the lot of the ill. To be sure, there would be reason to focus on the ill poor, before the ill rich, but there would also be reason to focus on the ill rich, before the healthy poor. After all, increasing the income or wealth of the healthy poor would reduce the gap between the healthy poor and the healthy rich, but in doing this it would *increase* the gap between the healthy poor and the ill rich. On the view in question, this would be akin to improving the lot of some who were, in fact, *already* among the world’s better off in terms of what matters *most*, and this might, in fact, *worsen* the situation’s overall inequality.

Similar remarks might hold for other components that play a central role in our lives. So, to note but one other example, if, as some believe, most love-filled lives are better than most loveless lives, and if, as seems plausible, being rich is neither necessary nor sufficient for having a love-filled life, then it may well be that efforts to increase the income or wealth of the poor would often involve reducing the gap between the love-filled poor and the love-filled rich, but *increasing* the gap between the love-filled poor and the loveless rich. As before, this might amount to improving the lot of some who were *already* among the world’s better off in terms of what matters *most*, and might actually *worsen* the situation’s overall inequality.

Let me be clear. I am not arguing that we have reason to be complacent about our world’s extraordinary economic inequalities. Indeed, as has been amply demonstrated, there are important correlations between economic status and many other central components of well-being.¹³ Still, the preceding discussion may have important implications regarding the aims and focus of egalitarianism. If the inequalities that matter *most* are actually inequalities of food, health, safety, and the like, or inequalities in rights, freedom, stable homes, or love, then there may need to be a profound shift in the tools, approach, and policies of real world egalitarianism.

Perhaps egalitarians need to consult doctors, nutritionists, agronomists, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, social workers, and others. Perhaps they require meaningful measures of serious illness, nutritional deprivation, human rights realization, political stability, functional family life, or meaningful love, at least as much as measures of economic inequality. Similarly, perhaps the focus of egalitarianism needs to change from efforts to shift the wage scale, alter people’s savings habits, or redistribute wealth, to altering the focus and distribution of medical care, increasing

crop yields, changing patterns of nutritional consumption, promoting political stability or human rights, developing stable families, fostering loving relationships, and so on.

Even to suggest that egalitarians should take on such tasks may sound ludicrous. After all, it is by no means clear what might even count as a fully satisfactory situation in some of these respects, much less how one might go about quantifying, or measuring, some of these factors. Moreover, it may seem utterly beyond our reach to think we could develop effective social policies to reduce the inequalities in some of these areas, even if we agreed that doing so might be desirable. And no doubt the messiness and complexities associated with the tasks envisioned, help to partly explain the propensity to focus on economic inequalities; which, as noted above, are readily identifiable, measurable, and, in principle, rectifiable via discernible economic policies. Moreover, it may seem clear that economic inequalities *are* bad, and *should* be addressed, even if they are not the only inequalities that matter.

However, the preceding remarks suggest that the contemporary preoccupation with economic inequalities may be problematic. Focusing on economic inequality may direct our attention away from the inequalities that actually matter most, and so involve a waste of effort and resources in the fight for meaningful equality. Worse, in some cases reducing economic inequality might not merely be inefficient, it might be counterproductive, exacerbating overall inequality in terms of what matters most.

I conclude that we must be wary of regarding the problem of inequality as a kind economic “nail,” because we are in possession of, and fairly adept at using, the powerful “hammer” of economic analysis. We must take seriously the full range of complex answers that might be given to the “equality of what” question, thinking hard about what factors are most central and valuable for human flourishing, and how the various components of well-being are related and distributed. Correspondingly, in identifying, measuring, and addressing inequality, we may need to use, and perhaps even forge, a host of other, non-economic, “tools” for social, cultural, and psychological analysis.

IV. The Subsistence Level, Sufficiency, and Compassion

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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, though no less deserving (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.

Let us next consider the claim that instead of caring about equality, we should care about *sufficiency* – that people have "enough," and the related claim that it is important to show *compassion* for people who are poorly off, but not to promote equality, *per se*. Harry Frankfurt 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," 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.¹⁶ 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."¹⁷ Roger Crisp echoes Frankfurt'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.¹⁸

Frankfurt and Crisp's positions challenge egalitarianism. But I believe we should reject their views. To see why, consider the following example.

I have two daughters. My daughters aren't super-rich, but by the criteria that *truly* matter most, they are 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 twenty dollars 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 have no doubt that I would regard it as a good turn of events if a gust of wind arose to redirect it towards Becky. My immediate wish would be for Becky to discover that wonderful pleasure of "finding" money on a walk. But more generally, I would regard it as better if Becky found the money 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.

My reason for this is egalitarian in nature. 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.

V. Prioritarianism and the Leveling Down Objection¹⁹

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 the foregoing by the *Raising Up* and *Leveling Down Objections*. Roughly, the Leveling Down Objection claims that there is *no* respect in which a situation is normatively improved *merely* by leveling down a better-off person to the level of someone worse-off. 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 leveling 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,²⁰ I have argued that the Leveling 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 Leveling 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 Leveling Down Objections compelling against non-instrumental egalitarianism. Most such responses turn on rejecting the Slogan, as a *narrow* person-affecting principle, in favor of a *wide* person-affecting principle²¹ 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.²² Tim Scanlon once wrote that “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.”²³ Followers of the view in question extend the “uncontrovertible insight” beyond rights to all of morality. As Roger 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.”²⁴

I accept my critics’ claim that one could reject the Slogan and still endorse the Leveling 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 leveled at the Slogan, namely the Non-Identity Problem,²⁵ 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* impersonal moral values.

I have argued against basing the Leveling Down and Raising Up Objections on a wide-person affecting view at length elsewhere,²⁶ 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 Leveling 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 Leveling Down Objections do little more than point out an obvious implication of non-instrumental egalitarianism. The non-instrumental egalitarian claims that 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 Leveling 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 Leveling 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*.

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 Leveling Down Objections are among the many anti-egalitarians mesmerized by "pure" equality's terrible implications. But, of course, as observed earlier, 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 a million 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 as moral ideals, only that morality is complex.

The main lesson of the Raising Up and Leveling 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.

VI. Equality or Priority? Illustrating Egalitarianism's Distinct Appeal

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. Though far-fetched, 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, and hardly benefit those below, then surely I could 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.²⁷ 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.

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 of 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 among the very best off. Moreover, importantly, I think Ruth must probably be counted among 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 who she is no less deserving than. 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 considerations I have provided support such a view.

VII. Conclusion

This article has tried to illuminate the nature and appeal of egalitarianism, understood as a position whose fundamental concern is with comparative fairness. Though

it has addressed many issues, it has, perforce, had to ignore many other important issues. For example, it has not broached any of the complicated issues associated with inequality's enormous complexity, with inequality's mattering more at low levels than high levels, with how variations in population size affect inequality, or with whether egalitarians should be concerned about comparing people's lives taken as complete wholes, or different segments of their lives.²⁸ Nor has it broached the issues of the extents, if any, to which egalitarians should be concerned about inequalities across time, space, societies, or species.²⁹ But if this article is right, we cannot simply ignore such issues; for equality as comparative fairness is one important ideal, among others, that must be taken seriously.

Notes

- * Over the years I have been influenced by many people on the topics discussed here. While my poor memory prevents me from properly acknowledging them all, I'd like to thank John Broome, G. A. Cohen, Roger Crisp, Nils Holtug, Susan Hurley, Thomas Nagel, Derek Parfit, Ingmar Persson, and Andrew Williams. I'd also like to thank the editors of this volume, Thomas Christiano and John Christman. Finally, I need to acknowledge that this article draws on a number of my previously published works, especially, "Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection" (in Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams, eds., *The Ideal of Equality*, Macmillan Press Ltd. and St. Martin's Press, Inc., 2000, pp. 81–125); "Inequality: A Complex, Individualistic, and Comparative Notion" (in Ernie Sosa and Enriquea Villanueva, eds., *Philosophical Issues* 11, Blackwell Publishers, 2001, pp. 327–52), and "Egalitarianism Defended" (in *Ethics* 113, 2003: 764–82).
- 1 See Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- 2 Derek Parfit introduces the terminology of *telic* and *deontic egalitarianism* in "Equality or Priority?" (The Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas, 1991, copyright 1995 by Department of Philosophy, University of Kansas; reprinted in *The Ideal of Equality*. Corresponding notions are also introduced in Chapter 1 of my book *Inequality*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 11).
- 3 There can be pluralism at many levels. So, for example, I believe that different versions of equality may all be plausible to varying degrees; that within any given version of egalitarianism different kinds of equality may be plausible (see section III); that different aspects of equality may be relevant for measuring any particular kind of equality that matters (see *Inequality*); and so on. Moreover, I believe that some conceptions of equality, and in particular equality as comparability, can themselves be regarded as but one component of a conception of justice, which itself is but one component of a still wider conception of justice, that can include such diverse elements as a Rawlsian conception of justice that focuses on the plight of the worst off group, and a Kantian conception of absolute justice, according to which the good deserve to fare well, and the evil deserve to fare poorly. Likewise, there may be more than one plausible conception, kind, or aspect of freedom, utility, perfection, or any other ideal that matters.
- 4 For classic statements of their views, see Richard Arneson, "Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," *Philosophical Studies* 56 (1989): 77–93; Ronald Dworkin, "What is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare," and "Part 2: Equality of Resources," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981): 185–246, 283–345, and G. A. Cohen, "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice," *Ethics* 99 (1989): 906–44.
- 5 See Cohen's "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice" and my *Inequality*.