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EQUALITY VERSUS PRIORITY: A MISLEADING DISTINCTION

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Abstract: The question for those who are concerned with inequalities is not whether to be an egalitarian or a prioritarian. That choice is mislabelled and misconceived. The relevant question is why distributive inequalities are of more than merely instrumental importance with respect to unrelated goals, such as maximizing well-being. The answer is that lessening inequalities in well-being serves a fundamental commitment to equality of moral status. Depending on the circumstances and what is to be distributed, the underlying concern with equality of moral status (coupled with non-distributional concerns about deprivation) might make one resemble a prioritarian, a non-prioritarian egalitarian, or neither.

Keywords: Egalitarianism, Prioritarianism, Moral Status, Well-being.

People condemn inequalities for many reasons. For example, many who have no concern with distribution *per se* criticize inequalities in health care, because these inequalities lessen the benefits provided by the resources that are devoted to health care. Others who place no intrinsic value on distribution believe that a just society must show a special concern for those who are worst off. Some people, on the other hand, do place an intrinsic value on equality of distribution, regardless of its contribution to other goals. Derek Parfit and Larry Temkin call these people 'egalitarians'. I shall always employ quotation marks when referring to 'egalitarians' in this special sense, because, as I shall argue, this terminology is misleading. One of its unhappy implications is that almost all egalitarians are not 'egalitarians'.

'Egalitarians' in this tendentious sense favour distributing goods and harms equally, other things being equal. An 'egalitarian' may be concerned with other things, too, and an 'egalitarian' need not weight

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equality more heavily than anything else. So an 'egalitarian' need not endorse the unattractive view that it would be better, all things considered, to worsen the lives of those who are better off than average in order to diminish inequality.

Some philosophers, such as Temkin and Parfit, believe that those committed to egalitarian policies face a fundamental choice between 'egalitarianism' and the view that those who are worse off should have a certain priority over those who are better off. Those who hold such a view, whom Parfit (1991) calls 'prioritarians' and Temkin calls 'extended humanitarians' (1993: Ch. 9), care about those who are worse off, not about distribution itself, though they will in practice seek to lessen inequalities. It can be difficult to describe examples where the policies endorsed by 'egalitarians' and prioritarians diverge, and Marc Fleurbaey (2015) argues convincingly that prioritarians are a species of egalitarians who differ from other egalitarians only with respect to the justification of egalitarianism and the measurement of inequality. From the point of view of policy, prioritarians and 'egalitarians' differ – if at all – only in their views concerning how to measure inequality.

Suppose, for example, there is some way to improve the situation of those who are worse off, but in so doing one also benefits the better off and, according to some measures of inequality, actually *increases* inequality. The prioritarian would approve, and it might appear that the 'egalitarian' who measures inequality this way would not. But this is not necessarily the case, since this 'egalitarian' might also value the total level of benefits or the egalitarian might be committed to the Pareto principle, which endorses changes that make some people better off without making anybody worse off. Prioritarians may, however, disagree with some 'egalitarians.' Consider, for example, two changes that increase total benefits by the same amount. In one there are more benefits to the very worst off, while in the other there is a greater decline in inequality (measured in some way other than by focusing on the very worst off). Although the prioritarian will prefer the first and this 'egalitarian' will favour the latter, the difference between 'egalitarians' and prioritarians lies less in the policies they recommend than in the *reasons* they would give for the egalitarian policies they both favour.

Astute readers will have noticed the absence of scare quotes around the last use of 'egalitarian.' That was no accident. Egalitarians are those who favour lessening inequalities, because of their commitment to moral principles linked to distribution. 'Egalitarians', prioritarians, and many others are egalitarians, and egalitarians should not permit those few philosophers who claim to value equality *itself* to hijack the name 'egalitarian'.

Before proceeding further, something needs to be said about what it is whose unequal distribution the egalitarian objects to. As

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Amartya Sen (1992) and others have pointed out, there are many forms of egalitarianism, and egalitarianism with respect to some things will preclude egalitarianism with respect to others. For example, 'egalitarianism' is a widely held position with respect to fundamental rights, and my critique here is not directed against it. The debate over 'equality' versus priority is posed by Parfit as a dispute concerning the distribution of *well-being*. Since the benefits provided by a health system are a component of well-being, it may seem reasonable to frame debates concerning the distribution of health services this way. But health systems also bear heavily on fundamental opportunities, and make possible an argument for equality with respect to the provision of health services that does not depend on a commitment to equality of well-being. Even if the opposition between egalitarianism and prioritarianism were well defined, it would not be obvious how to apply it to questions concerning health.

Why should one care about inequalities in well-being, apart from their consequences for the well-being of individuals, for the protection of rights, and so forth? 'Egalitarians' answer (a) that inequality is itself a bad thing or (b) that inequality involves injustice. Parfit thus maintains that there are two varieties of 'egalitarianism', which he calls 'teleological' and 'deontic'. But the second is not really a form of 'egalitarianism.' No plausible moral theory maintains that all inequalities in well-being are, other things being equal, unjust. No one believes that there is any regard in which it is less *just* if those who are guilty of serious crimes have a lower level of well-being than those who are innocent. What Parfit calls 'deontic egalitarianism' is concerned instead with whether a state of affairs has been brought about wrongly or has wrongly been allowed to persist. Such a concern is only accidentally egalitarian with respect to well-being, since some equalities in well-being are as unjust as some inequalities.

What Parfit calls 'teleological egalitarianism' is the only real variety of 'egalitarianism'. According to teleological 'egalitarianism', inequalities in well-being are bad in themselves. If we were all equally well-off here on earth and, unbeknownst to us, human-like entities in some distant quarter of the universe were better off, that inequality would be a bad thing. I find such a view unappealing, but I will leave criticism of 'egalitarianism' to others.[1] My points are (1) that 'egalitarianism' purports to explain why the inequalities that surround us are objectionable, (2) that this reason is controversial and (3) that many egalitarians do not accept it.

[1] I find this consequence of teleological egalitarianism unpalatable, because I cannot see why an inequality matters unless it bears on some possible individual or unless it involves injustice. In an example like the one discussed in the text, there is by assumption no risk of bringing about anything that is in any other way harmful. And how could there be any injustice, when there is no interaction and no harm or risk of harm?

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The prioritarian proposes a second reason why one should care about inequalities in well-being. Instead of caring about equality *per se*, the prioritarian is concerned about those who are worse off. As Parfit uses the terminology, what matters is an individual's 'absolute' level of well-being, not the relative position in a distribution. One is concerned not with how well off an individual is compared with others, but with how well off an individual is compared with how well off he or she could be. So, for example, the prioritarian might place more moral weight on benefiting a middle-income Nigerian than the poorest Swede if the former were at a lower level of well-being than the latter.[2] Although distribution is of no intrinsic importance to the prioritarian, in weighting the good of those who are worse off more heavily than the good of those who are better off, prioritarians, like 'egalitarians', will fight against inequalities.

As a justification for egalitarian policies, prioritarianism seems to me as intuitively unappealing as 'egalitarianism'. Consider two individuals, *A* and *B*, with no connection to one another, living splendid lives on remote islands or distant galaxies. Why should the fact that *A* is better off than *B* constitute *any* reason why *B*'s well-being should command greater priority than *A*'s? The problem with the prioritarian and the 'egalitarian' accounts as justifications for egalitarian policies is that neither 'egalitarianism' nor 'prioritarianism' is 'deep' enough to provide any satisfactory account of what is disturbing about inequalities. To explain what is wrong with inequalities by saying that equality is intrinsically valuable or that one should give special weight to the interests of the worse off invites virtually the same question that one was supposed to answer: Why should inequalities matter? Why should improving the well-being of the worse off matter more than improving the well-being of the better off?

What really drives most egalitarians, I maintain, is not captured by 'egalitarianism' or prioritarianism. Egalitarians are instead more often motivated by two other factors. The first has no intrinsic connection to equality at all. It is a concern with the terrible circumstances of those who are worst off in the societies that we are familiar with. The misery, shame, helplessness, degradation and servility of those who are poor give one reason to fight against inequalities in wealth. The limitation of freedom and the stunting of intellect and sensibility caused by poor education give one reason to find against inequalities in schooling. The suffering of those who are sick and the shrinking of their lives give one reason to fight against inequalities in health.[3] This humanitarian concern for the

[2] Prioritarians are not, of course, fixated on money. The relative material deprivation of the poorest Swede might make them absolutely worse off than middle-income Nigerians, despite their greater wealth.

[3] '[W]hat makes us care about various inequalities is … the hunger of the hungry, the need of the needy, the suffering of the ill, and so on. The fact that they are worse off in the

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plight of those who are badly off leads to a radical critique of existing inequalities, but it does not necessarily support equality of welfare or equality of resources. This humanitarian concern might for example be satisfied by the guarantee of a generous minimum to those who are worst off, regardless of the extent of inequality.

The concern with those who are badly off need not, however, only be a concern about their welfare. It can also be a concern about their self-respect, their moral status and the respect they are owed. And interpreted this way, the concern with those who are poor bleeds into the other factor I shall discuss that motivates egalitarianism, which is an insistence on the *moral equality* of people (Tawney 1931; Miller 1982).[4] All people have the same intrinsic worth, deserve the same 'baseline' respect from others, and deserve from their society an impartial and equal respect for their interests. Related to this are views about self-respect and fraternity. Each person should be able to get up in the morning, look in the mirror, and say to himself or herself, 'I may not be the best basketball player, cook, or dancer. I may not have as happy a disposition as some of my neighbours have. My experiences, interests, abilities and passions are not the same as others. But (provided I have not forfeited a claim to self-respect and to the regard of others by my actions) I have the same worth as everyone else, and that is how others treat me and how they must treat me.[5] I have no betters, and my society recognizes none as better than me. The institutions in my society favour none over me and favour me over none other. Should we happen to find one another's company agreeable, I could be friends with anyone. No one is above me or below me.'

Such a view is related to the position that Parfit calls 'deontic egalitarianism', but it takes more seriously than Parfit does the gap between on the one hand the fundamental equality of moral status and mutual respect that drives egalitarians and, on the other hand, concerns about equality in the distribution of well-being that drive 'egalitarians'. A concern for equality of moral status does not automatically rule out inequalities in wealth, income, social status and well-being (Griffin 1986: 297–301). Whether such inequalities matter depends on the circumstances. In actual circumstances, a concern for equality of moral status supports

relevant respect than their neighbours is relevant. But it is relevant not as an independent evil of inequality. Its relevance is in showing that their hunger is greater, their need more pressing, their suffering more hurtful, and therefore our concern for the hungry, the needy, the suffering, and not our concern for equality makes us give them the priority' (Raz 1984: 240).

[4] For a related view and a related critique of the contemporary philosophical discussions of egalitarianism, see Anderson (1999).

[5] Note that I am not talking about merely the sort of respect for rational agency that drives Kantian ethics. That respect, unlike the sort of respect I am talking about, is owed just as much to the mass murderer as to the ordinary upright citizen.

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strongly egalitarian policies, because the inequalities that exist today within and between nations undermine equality of moral status. Equality of moral status cannot be achieved if inequalities in wealth, income, social status and well-being are large or if they are *pervasive*. Those concerned with equality of moral status must be particularly concerned with pervasive inequalities, whereby those who are richer are also healthier, happier, more powerful, better educated and more respected. Although some inequalities in health might be themselves of moral concern, egalitarians motivated by a concern with moral status will be especially concerned about correlations between inequalities in health and inequalities along other dimensions.

Different kinds of anti-egalitarians disagree in different ways with egalitarians. Principled anti-egalitarians deny that human beings have an equal moral status. In their view, those belonging to some genders, races, castes, classes or tribes have a higher moral status than those belonging to others. More common than principled anti-egalitarians are what one might call 'perverse egalitarians'. They agree that all human beings have an equal moral status, but disagree about what this means. Utilitarians can, for example, be regarded as interpreting the possession of an 'equal moral status' as having one's happiness count equally. On this interpretation, one respects equality of moral status merely by maximizing happiness and thereby counting a quantity of happiness equally no matter whose it is. Similarly, libertarians can be seen as interpreting equality of moral status as the possession of certain rights and freedoms, and in this interpretation as in the utilitarian's, equality of moral status no longer leads to egalitarian policies. Finally, there are those whom one might call empirical anti-egalitarians. They share the interpretation of equality of moral status sketched above, but deny the empirical claims that equality of moral status requires narrow and uncorrelated inequalities with respect to political influence and resources.

In a penetrating comment on an earlier draft of this essay, Susan Hurley objected that, despite its pretensions, this essay does not undermine the equality-priority distinction. Instead, in her view, it criticizes the concern with well-being rather than moral status. Rather than rejecting 'egalitarianism', she maintains that it espouses 'egalitarianism' concerning moral status. From one perspective, Hurley's point (which was also suggested to me by Marc Fleurbaey) seems clearly correct: the view I espouse is concerned with equalizing something. But unlike the 'egalitarianism' or the 'prioritarianism' that Parfit discusses, my view does not presuppose that equality has any intrinsic value or that the claims of those who are worst off (along any dimension) *ipso facto* deserve a special weight.

Just as one can ask, 'Why be concerned with equality *per se*?' and 'Why weight the interests of the worse off more heavily?' so one can ask,

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'Why care about equality of moral status?' Answers to ethical questions give out when one reaches fundamental notions, and I think that at this point, one is close to the foundations of morality. As Griffin puts it, 'to see things morally is to grant everyone some sort of equal standing' (1986: 295). Virtually all moral theories find their origin in some notion of equal respect owed to moral agents, and the concerns with *equality* of moral status derive not from a concern with equality itself, but from a concern with a particular kind of status. Everyone should have an equal moral status because everyone should have the moral status of a person, and, possessing that moral status, all are equal to one another. If everyone has achieved the full moral status of a human being, then no one can have a higher status. One might also speculate that the true status of a person can be possessed by all only if possessed equally. In a society that does not accord the same baseline respect to all its members – that explicitly or implicitly admits of different 'grades' of human beings – a certain sort of moral identity may not be possible.

An 'egalitarian' such as Temkin might object that in founding this justification for egalitarianism in a non-distributional commitment to moral status, I have undermined my claim to have defended a genuine egalitarianism. Just as utilitarians are not really egalitarians, even though they may support egalitarian policies as a means to increasing total happiness, so one might complain that the view here fails to value equality itself. But the view sketched here does not treat equality as instrumental to extraneous ends. Although it finds no intrinsic value in distribution itself, equality is here a consequence of placing a certain value on agents, rather than a means toward achieving that value.

A concern with equality of moral status supports relatively egalitarian policies, and in particular, it supports a practical prioritarianism. If those who are worse off are impoverished, scorned, or excluded, then their moral status is degraded. But a concern for equality of moral status does not support complete equalizing and does not always support weighting the interests of someone who is worse off more than the interests of someone who is better off. *Wide disparities* and *absolute miseries* threaten equality of moral status, but narrow disparities, when even the worst off are in happy circumstances, do not. To make this point salient and to make vivid and concrete my objections to conceiving of issues about equality in terms of a choice between 'equality' and priority, let me sketch a portrait of an egalitarian utopia. This is a liberal individualistic utopia, because I also value liberal individualism and because I want to emphasize the consistency between inequalities and egalitarianism I espouse. But egalitarianism and liberal individualism are separate theories, and there are other ideals of social life with much more uniformity among members of a society, which would also be consistent with equality of moral status.

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AN ANTI-'EGALITARIAN' EGALITARIAN UTOPIA

> Consider a society in which there are thousands of different activities in which excellence matters. Some of these activities are competitive, and others are not. There are hobbies, professions, charities, sciences, technologies, rituals, sports, recreations and creative arts; and there are inequalities in performance in each of their myriad dimensions. There are non-trivial differences in social status, with those who show remarkable excellence at particular activities or special concern with serving others garnering the most honours. There are inequalities in incomes, with those who choose to work more earning more. A few of those with special excellencies earn moderately high incomes by capitalizing on their achievements, despite general social disapproval of doing so. Inequalities in income are limited by progressive taxation and by a generous universal grant provided to all people, whether or not they work for an income. Although inequalities in income are not trivial, they are not correlated with social status or political power. Indeed most of those with the highest status and the most political influence are among the poorest, because, freed by the universal grant from the need to work for a living, they devote themselves to benefiting others or to political causes. Inequalities in the political dimension are narrowly limited, but unavoidably those who are better informed and better able to persuade others have more effective political power. Health is unavoidably unequal, and some correlations between health and other differences are unavoidable, too, both because differences such as age and attitudes toward risk affect health and because health affects abilities and opportunities. Inequalities in health nevertheless are not caused by differences in wealth or social status and their effects on life prospects, opportunities, and social status are reduced as much as is feasible. The society is affluent, but not extremely so. Those with the lowest incomes, who subsist on the universal grant, have fewer private resources than the lower classes in today's developed societies, but they do not suffer from the degradation, loss of status, limited opportunities, crime or instability that afflict today's poor.

In this hypothetical society, there are many inequalities, though their magnitudes are muted in the domains of income and social status and severely constrained with respect to political influence and opportunity. Because of this and because the many inequalities do not correlate with one another, the society is, I maintain, an egalitarian utopia.[6] The myriad inequalities are irrelevant to equality with respect to moral status, which is robustly embedded into the institutions and values that govern this society. Note that I am not maintaining that the inequalities in the different

[6] This vision of egalitarianism resembles Michael Walzer's 'complex equality' in *Spheres of Justice* (1983). Unlike Walzer's position, however, this view is not committed to the existence of 'separate spheres', in Walzer's sense, or to the view that each sphere ought to be governed by the rules implicit in the social understanding of the sort of goods distributed within it.

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domains compensate for one another in order to achieve some overall equality in well-being. One of the luxuries of this position is that one does not even have to raise the question of whether individuals are equally well off. Having transcended degradation and misery and having protected equality of moral status, inequalities in well-being – even if one could measure them – do not matter.

Of course, the real world is not like this. In the real world, inequalities in resources, abilities, well-being, opportunities, health and so forth matter enormously, because they involve great and avoidable suffering, and because they have a huge impact on moral status. Those who are concerned with equality of moral status must thus struggle to lessen inequalities of all kinds. Egalitarianism with respect to resources, health or well-being is nevertheless not a fundamental value, and neither is favouring the interests of those who are worse off. Opposition to inequalities and concern for the well-being of those who are worse off derive instead from a combination of more fundamental commitments (to alleviating suffering and to insuring equality of moral status), and from the contingent *fact* that mitigation of existing inequalities is necessary in order to alleviate suffering and to make equality of moral status possible.[7] Lessening inequalities in well-being is of value both because of the consequences of inequalities of well-being and because of the underlying moral commitment to equality of moral status.

The question for those who are concerned with inequalities – that is the question for genuine egalitarians – is not whether to be an 'egalitarian' or a prioritarian. That choice is mislabelled and misconceived. The relevant question is why distributive inequalities are of more than merely instrumental importance with respect to completely unrelated goals. The answer to the relevant question is that lessening inequalities in well-being serves a fundamental commitment to equality of moral status. Depending on the circumstances and the particular things to be distributed, the underlying concerns with equality of moral status (coupled with non-distributional concerns about deprivation) might make one resemble a prioritarian, a non-prioritarian 'egalitarian', or neither. With respect to contemporary developing economies, I would argue that one should be a prioritarian about incomes and an egalitarian about health care – but not because of a commitment to 'egalitarianism' or prioritarianism.

[7] There are of course other arguments for egalitarian principles. Consider, for example, Rawls' case (1971) for equality of opportunity and for the difference principle as the basis for stable terms of social cooperation. In addition, egalitarians should emphasize that there are powerful non-egalitarian reasons to oppose the glaring inequalities that characterize virtually every feature of the contemporary world.

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