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WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN (MODERATE) EGALITARIANISM AND PRIORITARIANISM?

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It is common to define egalitarianism in terms of an inequality ordering, which is supposed to have some weight in overall evaluations of outcomes. Egalitarianism, thus defined, implies that levelling down makes the outcome better in respect of reducing inequality; however, the levelling down objection claims there can be nothing good about levelling down. The priority view, on the other hand, does not have this implication. This paper challenges the common view. The standard definition of egalitarianism implicitly assumes a context. Once this context is made clear, it is easily seen that egalitarianism could be defined alternatively in terms of valuing a benefit to a person inversely to how well off he is relative to others. The levelling down objection does not follow from this definition. Moreover, the common definition does not separate egalitarian orderings from prioritarian ones. It is useful to do this by requiring that on egalitarianism, additively separable orderings should be excluded. But this requirement is stated as a condition on the alternative definition of egalitarianism, from which the levelling down objection does not follow.

1. INTRODUCTION

Most egalitarians take, as their point of departure, the objection to utilitarianism that it does not adequately count the value of equality. Clearly, in valuing only the total of welfare, regardless of who gets

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it, the utilitarian shows no concern for equality in the distribution of welfare. When it comes to the distribution of resources, utilitarianism might happen, instrumentally, to favour equality. But even this will be possible only under the special condition that everyone has the same welfare function. Where this condition is not met, utilitarianism is likely to favour inequality (Sen, 1973, pp. 15–18).

How, then, should we count the value of equality? Although egalitarians agree that utilitarianism is flawed, they disagree about what is valuable about equality and, hence, in their diagnoses of where utilitarianism goes wrong. In trying to decide what value, if any, we should attach to equality, it will be necessary to distinguish different views on the value of equality and examine their implications. A seminal work in this field is Derek Parfit's (1995) Lindley Lecture, "Equality or priority?". As the title suggests, Parfit takes the main issue to involve a choice between the egalitarian view, that it is in itself bad if some people are worse off than others (which he calls telic egalitarianism), and the view that benefiting people matters more the worse off these people are (the telic priority view).[1]

According to Parfit, these are quite different kinds of view. He writes:

> The chief difference can be introduced like this. I have said that, on the Priority View, we do not believe in equality. We do not think it in itself bad, or unjust, that some people are worse off than others. This claim can be misunderstood. We do of course think it bad that some people are worse off. But what is bad is not that these people are worse off than others. It is rather that they are worse off than they might have been.
>
> Consider next the central claim of the Priority View: benefits to the worse off matter more. The same ambiguity can lead one astray. On this view, if I am worse off than you, benefits to me are more important. Is this *because* I am worse off than you? In one sense, yes. But this has nothing to do with my relation to you.
>
> [. . .], on the Priority View, benefits to the worse off matter more, but that is only because these people are at a lower *absolute* level. It is irrelevant that these people are worse off *than others*. Benefits to them would matter just as much even it there *were* no others who were better off.
>
> The chief difference is, then, this. Egalitarians are concerned with relativities: with how each person's level compares with the level of other people. On the Priority View, we are concerned only with people's absolute levels. (1995, pp. 22–3)

[1] Parfit uses the term "telic" to refer to a teleological consideration, i.e., a view on how to compare outcomes in terms of betterness. Telic views are not committed to the general teleological, or consequentialist, claim that the right alternative is the one involving the best outcome. They are committed only to the claim that positive outcome-factors, such as equality or priority being given to the worse off, make an outcome better, even if other considerations count as well. Since this paper only deals with telic views, I shall omit this qualifier.

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This is a fundamental structural difference, Parfit says. Because of this, there are several ways in which these views might have different implications. The views disagree most deeply in cases giving rise to the "levelling down objection". This objection appeals to cases where the disappearance of some inequality would be worse for some people and better for no one. Consider a move from (2) to (1):

(1)	Everyone at some level	
(2)	Some at this	Others better off

Because, on egalitarianism, inequality is in itself bad, its disappearance must be *in one way* a change for the better even where it is worse for some people and better for no one. To many observers, this implication seems absurd, says Parfit.

The priority view avoids this problem, because it has the implication that the inequality produced by a move from (1) to (2) does not matter; that inequality is not bad for people: it makes no one worse off, and benefits some. And its removal is in no way a change for the better, according to the priority view.

The disagreement here between the egalitarian and the prioritarian is not necessarily about the relative ranking of the outcomes, all things considered. Even though, on egalitarianism, the inequality in (2) makes it worse than (1), this could be outweighed by a greater total of welfare so that (2) is better than (1), all things considered.

Moreover, this could be true by definition. Parfit distinguishes between *strong* and *moderate egalitarians*. The former accept that inequality *can* sometimes make an outcome worse, all things considered, even when this outcome would be better for somebody and worse for nobody. The latter deny this claim. They hold, by definition, that an outcome *cannot* be worse, all things considered, when this outcome would be better for somebody and worse for nobody.

Parfit says that moderates must nevertheless agree that, on their view, outcome (1) would be better *in one way*. The levelling down objection challenges this claim. The objection is that if we achieve equality by levelling down, there can be *nothing* good about what we have done. Parfit thinks that this objection is forceful. It suggests to him that egalitarianism must be wrong; it cannot be bad in itself that some people are worse off than others.

On the priority view, we might reach much the same all-things-considered judgements as moderate egalitarians; but we avoid the levelling down objection. Suppose we originally became attracted to egalitarianism, but that we are then convinced by the levelling down objection. By moving to the priority view, we can retain many of our earlier views. Thus, according to Parfit, the levelling down objection can be part of an argument in favour of the priority view.

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I shall challenge this reasoning. The levelling down objection appears to arise straightforwardly from Parfit's definition of egalitarianism. On this definition, egalitarianism involves an independent objective – the principle of equality – which states that it is in itself bad if some people are worse off than others. However, it is far from obvious that egalitarianism should be defined as Parfit defines it. First, his definition depends on certain underlying assumptions about context, which I shall bring into the open. Secondly, these assumptions, once made explicit, suggest that moderate egalitarianism could equally well be defined in terms of how to value benefits to people; and from this definition the levelling down objection would not follow.

Thirdly, Parfit's definition allows moderate egalitarianism to imply an ordering of outcomes equivalent to the priority view. Accordingly, there seems to be no "structural difference" between these views: the difference concerns the reasoning behind them alone. However, I believe there are good reasons to define egalitarianism as a view that is distinct from the priority view. Hence, I suggest the difference between moderate egalitarianism and prioritarianism should be located in the difference between a strongly separable and a possibly weakly but not strongly separable ordering of outcomes. For one thing, this approach seems to me to capture Parfit's remark about egalitarianism being concerned with relativities better than his own definition does. For another thing, a definition leading to practical differences in the ordering of outcomes is more interesting.

It is worth pointing out that this account of the difference requires us to define egalitarianism in terms of an ordering of outcomes, rather than in terms of the principle of equality. The levelling down objection does not arise once this definition is adopted. Hence, the simple argument in favour of the priority view is no longer available.

2. PARFIT'S DEFINITION OF EGALITARIANISM AND THE REQUIREMENTS OF INDEPENDENCE

By way of background, I now need to present Parfit's definitions in some detail. I shall be concerned with telic views only, that is, views on the evaluation of outcomes. Parfit restricts his discussion to outcomes involving distributions of welfare across the *same* set of n people, and I shall follow him in this restriction. Welfare is assumed to be perfectly measurable and comparable between people. Thus, an outcome (distribution) will be given by a vector $\boldsymbol{g} = (g_1, g_2, \ldots g_n)$, specifying each person's welfare.

Parfit (1995, p. 4, with the parenthetical qualification added in a footnote) defines the belief in egalitarianism as adherence to:

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The Principle of Equality: It is in itself bad if some people are worse off than others [through no fault or choice of their own].

This principle states one respect in which outcomes should be assessed. Hence, it must be assumed to have *some* weight in an overall comparison of outcomes.

A fuller statement of the principle, says Parfit, would require us to know, for any two outcomes, how they compare in respect of the badness of their inequality. Thus, the principle of equality is really to be understood as a binary relation, defined on all pairs of possible outcomes, which says whether or not, other things being equal, one outcome is worse than another in respect of inequality.

When *is* one outcome worse than another in respect of inequality? This question is not discussed by Parfit in any detail; he refers, however, to Larry Temkin's book *Inequality* (Temkin, 1993), which has this question as its principal subject matter. Temkin is concerned with "inequality as it is used in evaluating alternative distributions", as opposed to a purely descriptive notion of inequality. He believes that this notion can be elucidated "by treating inequality as (largely) separable from other moral factors" (1993, p. 17). Temkin's approach is then to judge the badness of outcomes regarding inequality in isolation from other criteria, including criteria of overall goodness.

I – and I believe many others – doubt whether it makes sense to argue about the badness of inequality without specifying the context in which this badness is to be combined with other considerations to yield an overall evaluation.[2] Temkin's approach builds on underlying assumptions which he does not make clear.

What does it mean to say (as Temkin does) that inequality is a factor that is separable from other factors?[3] The technical answer, I suggest, is that inequality should be separable in the overall betterness ranking. More precisely, the overall betterness ordering should be defined on a product set of the relevant factors and then each of these factors should be separable in the betterness ordering.[4]

This means, first, that inequality and all other factors affecting the relative goodness of distributions, all things considered, must be specified. The content of inequality as a moral factor can only be made precise by specifying this context. Clearly, inequality is likely to have different implications for different contexts: that inequality

[2] Temkin appears to be aware that some people are sceptical about his approach. See, for instance, pp. 16–17.

[3] I shall be concerned only with separability and ignore the qualifier "largely".

[4] A relation is an ordering if and only if it is reflexive, transitive and complete. This implies a complete ranking of all alternatives.

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should be judged separately from total welfare is one context; that inequality should be judged separately from another factor is a different context; and that inequality should be judged separately from *both* these factors is a third context. But Temkin seems to believe that there is an independent notion of inequality, that is, a notion whose content remains the same regardless of the number and character of other factors that enter into the judgement of relative goodness, all things considered.

The standard way of defining separability requires that the set of distributions can be written as a *product set* of factors. This means that the factors can be realized independently of each other. Suppose, for instance, that only two factors are relevant in comparing the relative overall goodness of distributions: their respective total welfare and their inequality. And suppose that we are to judge how inequality contributes to overall betterness for two distributions with different totals of welfare, such as (4, 1, 1) and (4, 4, 1). Since the value of the total welfare contributes to the comparison of goodness, all things considered, in its own right, we would want to make sure that the comparison in respect of inequality is concerned only with the part of the distributions concerned with inequality – the difference in distributional shape. We would not want that comparison to be concerned with the difference in total of welfare. So we should be able to split apart these factors and evaluate them separately. This is another requirement that Temkin does not state explicitly. If it is not fulfilled, there is no systematic way to ensure that a difference in total welfare does not enter into our judgement of how two distributions compare in terms of their inequality.

Suppose we start out, as Parfit and Temkin suggest, by comparing complete distributions in respect of inequality. The principle of equality is defined on complete distributions. How is it possible to ensure that the principle of equality, in a comparison of distributions, relates only to the difference in distributional shape and not the difference in total welfare? The answer is: by requiring that these factors can be realized independently of each other.

We can achieve this by placing some conditions on the principle of equality, that is, on the comparisons in respect of inequality. Suppose, in the example, we can find a distribution ***c*** which has the same total of welfare as (4, 4, 1) and which is equivalent to (4, 1, 1) in respect of inequality. Then ***c*** and (4, 4, 1) will be equal in terms of total welfare, and so by comparing them in respect of inequality, we can compare the inequality of (4, 1, 1) and (4, 4, 1) independently of their difference in total welfare. If we require a procedure like this to be applicable for all pairs of distributions,[5] then we

[5] I state this requirement more precisely in the next section.

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will be able to split apart the distributional difference (as exemplified by the difference between ***c*** and (4, 4, 1)) from the difference in total welfare (as exemplified by the difference between (4, 1, 1) and ***c***). This will ensure that any degree of equality can be realized independently of any level of total welfare.

Finally, separability of inequality requires that the contribution of a certain difference in distributional shape to overall goodness is in fact independent of the contribution of other factors. Suppose we compare two distributions, ***a*** and ***b***, which we consider equal in all relevant respects other than inequality. We happen to judge that ***b*** is worse than ***a***, all things considered. Separability of inequality then requires, for all pairs ***a**** and ***b****, where ***a*** and ***a**** are equivalent in their inequality, ***b*** and ***b**** are equivalent in their inequality, and ***a**** and ***b**** are equal in all other relevant respects, that ***a**** is in fact better than ***b****, all things considered. This ensures that a comparison of any given difference in distributional shape for fixed levels of the other factors will contribute the same, all things considered, independently of the level of these other factors.

Separability of inequality implies that we can derive a separate ordering of inequality from the overall betterness ordering. If we, on the other hand, start out with an ordering in respect of inequality, that is, some version of the principle of equality, then (assuming it is placed in a proper context as described above) this ordering should be *consistent* with the overall betterness ordering. Taking once again the example with two factors, this means that for all pairs of outcomes where the total level of welfare is the same, one is worse in respect of inequality than the other if and only if it is worse, all things considered. This will ensure that inequality is separable in the overall betterness ordering, and that the separate ordering of inequality which can be derived from the overall betterness ordering is, in fact, equivalent to the ordering in respect of inequality (the version of the principle of equality) from which we started.

Temkin does not explicitly state the requirement of separability either. This means that when he compares distributions in isolation from other considerations, he has no systematic way of ensuring that his judgements of the badness of the inequality of distributions actually make up an independent criterion of evaluation. He can only appeal to vague intuitions.

The principle of equality as a separate comparison of the badness of inequality can only be made precise by specifying the set of all morally relevant factors and the all-things-considered comparisons they enter into. Consequently, this context should be specified in a definition of egalitarianism.

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3. THE PLURALIST EGALITARIAN VIEW

As it happens, Parfit says that egalitarians will typically hold what he calls a *Pluralist Egalitarian View*. Besides the principle of equality, they appeal to one other principle:

> *The Principle of Utility*: It is in itself better if people are better off. (1995, p. 4)

Although this is not made explicit in the statement, it is clear from the text that the principle of utility is meant by Parfit as a shorthand for *the utilitarian principle of distribution*: other things being equal, one outcome is better than another if and only if it has greater total welfare. Again, this is meant as a claim about how distributions compare in one respect, that is, as regards total welfare. Welfare need not be thought of in traditional, narrow utilitarian terms as pleasure or desire-satisfaction. It should be noted, however, that Parfit takes any effect equality may have on welfare to be included in the principle of utility. Thus, the principle of equality is concerned with *intrinsic* value, that is, the value of equality apart from its instrumental value for welfare.

In deciding which outcome is better, all things considered, the pluralist egalitarian view gives weight to both these principles. Parfit seems to accept Temkin's approach of considering inequality in isolation from other considerations, but the pluralist egalitarian view is a clear instance of a view in which the principle of equality is put into a context of overall assessment together with the principle of utility, through the twin claims that both these principles have weight and that only these two principles matter. In what follows, I shall examine egalitarianism in this context. That is, I shall discuss egalitarianism only in the form of the pluralist egalitarian view.[6]

Let us now reconstruct the pluralist egalitarian view in accordance with the discussion above. I assume that the inequality relation makes up an ordering.[7] Dutta and Esteban (1992) have introduced the following useful general notion of mean-invariance (a notion I made use of above): an inequality ordering is *mean-invariant* if and only if, for all pairs of outcomes, where one is obtained from the other by adding non-negative amounts of welfare to all people and a positive amount of welfare to at least one person, there exists a distribution with the same total of welfare as the latter, such that it is equivalent to the former in respect of inequality. For instance, if we add three units of benefits to (4, 1, 1), there should be at

[6] Moderate egalitarianism plays a central role in Parfit's discussion of the levelling down objection. In his discussion of it, Parfit seems to have the pluralist egalitarian view in mind and not just an isolated principle of equality.

[7] This assumption was implicit in the discussion of separability above.

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least one way to do this that leaves the badness of inequality unchanged.[8] I assume that the inequality ordering is mean-invariant in this sense.

One way to ensure this is to assume that the inequality ordering is invariant with respect to proportional changes in welfare (Blackorby and Donaldson, 1978, 1984; Ebert, 1987). Another way is to assume that the inequality ordering is invariant with respect to equal absolute changes in the amount of welfare (Blackorby and Donaldson, 1980). Further, there is the possibility of invariance to combinations of these two extremes (Dutta and Esteban, 1992). The common feature of these assumptions is that there is always a way of distributing additional positive amounts of welfare so that the goodness of inequality is left unchanged. Hence, mean-invariance is assumed in one form or another in the economics papers that address the relation between a normatively significant inequality index and the all-things-considered ordering of outcomes.

By means of the mean-invariant inequality ordering, we get a partition of the set of possible outcomes into the set of equivalence classes regarding inequality. Pluralist egalitarianism can then be seen as given by a binary relation defined on pairs of means of welfare and members of the set of equivalence classes regarding inequality. For any such pair, this relation says whether one mean level of welfare distributed with a certain degree of inequality (i.e., belonging to a certain equivalence class), all things considered, is better or worse than another mean level of welfare distributed with a certain degree of inequality. The relation says how the mean level of welfare of an outcome (in Parfit's terms: the principle of utility) is to be weighed against the degree of inequality of its distribution (in Parfit's terms: the principle of equality), all things considered.

Following Parfit, I assume that the pluralist egalitarian view gives weight to both the principle of utility and the principle of equality, that is, I assume it is an ordering, such that for all pairs of outcomes where the mean level of welfare is the same, one is worse in respect of inequality than the other if and only if it is worse, all things considered; and that for all pairs where the distributions are equivalent in respect of inequality, one has greater mean welfare than the other if and only if it is better, all things considered. It is only by fulfilment of the first of these assumptions that the inequality ordering is consistent with the overall betterness ordering, and thus contributes its value to the overall value of the outcome independently of the value contributed by the mean level of welfare.

So far, I have assumed that what Parfit calls the principle of equality really is an ordering of distributions regarding inequality which fulfils the conditions of mean-invariance and consistency with the overall pluralist egalitarian betterness ordering. However, I have not touched on the

[8] The name *mean-invariance* may, therefore, be misleading, since the inequality ordering will not be invariant to the mean in general but only to at least one way of increasing it.

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question of how distributions should be ordered in respect of inequality. It seems clear that the class of equal distributions ranks lowest as regards badness of inequality; but apart from that, we know nothing so far about the shape of the inequality ranking.

Are any further restrictions on the orderings consistent with the principle of equality? Marc Fleurbaey (forthcoming) asks the same question. I believe he is right to point out that neither Parfit nor Temkin introduces any further restrictions. It would be possible, for instance, to assume the Pigou–Dalton condition on transfer.[9] This says that a transfer of some fixed amount of welfare (leaving the total unchanged) from someone better off to someone worse off (without making the latter as well off as, or better off than, the former) makes the outcome better, all things considered. We would still be left with a large group of orderings that count as egalitarian, however. I shall return to the question of requirements on the principle of equality in Section 6.

Finally, let me note that moderate egalitarianism is the group of orderings for which an equality achieved by "levelling down" – that is, by making some people worse off and no one better off – is always outweighed by the decrease in mean welfare.

4. PARFIT'S DEFINITION OF THE PRIORITY VIEW

Before I proceed to examine the implications of Parfit's definition of egalitarianism, I shall briefly discuss his definition of the priority view. Parfit defines the priority view by the following claim:

> *The Priority View*: Benefiting people matters more the worse off these people are. (1995, p. 19)

As it stands, this definition simply says that the value of a benefit is inversely related to the level of welfare of the person who receives it.[10] However, from the context it seems clear that Parfit considers the priority view to be a special deviation from utilitarianism. For utilitarians, the value of a benefit depends only on its size and is entirely independent of how well off everyone is – including the person benefited. The distinctive claim of the priority view is that a benefit has more value if it comes to a person

[9] I only mention this as an example of a requirement that is sometimes made in the literature. Fleurbaey notes that the Pigou–Dalton condition is somewhat controversial, because there are inequality measures that do not satisfy it. However, such measures will only be counterexamples if they can be shown to be normatively significant. Temkin argues that the Pigou–Dalton condition only has limited scope. But he defines it in a non-standard way. For instance, he takes it to include changes in the total of welfare. He presents no arguments against the statement given here. See also the discussion in Tungodden (2003).

[10] Walter Bossert pointed this out to me. Marc Fleurbaey (forthcoming) makes the same point.

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who is worse off; but from the discussion of the difference between the priority view and egalitarianism (Parfit, 1995, pp. 22–3, quoted above in the Introduction) it is clear that, for prioritarians, the value of a benefit is a function *only* of how well off the person is who receives it; it counts the same, regardless of how well off everyone else is.

It makes good sense to suggest, then, as I believe John Broome was the first to do,[11] that the priority view implies an ordering that can be represented by an *additively separable* function of this form:[12]

$$(3)\quad G_{PV}(\boldsymbol{g}) = w(g_1) + w(g_2) + \ldots + w(g_n)$$

(and any increasing transformation of it), where w is increasing and strictly concave. The essential feature of the priority view is that the contribution to the overall good made by benefiting a person depends only on how well off the beneficiary is, independently of the level of others; this feature is captured by the additive structure. The function w indicates how much a person's welfare counts in general good; it is the same function for all persons, indicating symmetry between people. Furthermore, w is strictly concave, reflecting the idea that each person's welfare has diminishing marginal moral weight.

If we define the priority view in terms of a function that represents it, non-continuous orderings like the maximin, which Parfit (1995) considers a possible limiting case of the priority view, and the leximin, are excluded. However, one can always stipulate that these orderings belong to the priority view as well. They do conflict with Parfit's general definition, though, which seems to involve continuity.[13]

Note that the priority view satisfies the Pigou–Dalton condition of transfers. It also satisfies what John Broome calls

> *The Principle of Personal Good*: If in one outcome everyone is at least as well off as in another, and someone is definitely better off, then this outcome is better than the other. (1991, p. 165)

Again, the definition picks out a group of orderings, each representing a different account of exactly how priority to the worse off should be weighed against increases in total welfare.

[11] In Broome (1991, p. 198). At that time, the term "priority view" had only just been introduced. The view itself, however, was well known among economists.

[12] In general, an additively separable function is a function of the form $F(\boldsymbol{x}) = f_1(x_1) + f_2(x_2) + \ldots + f_n(x_n)$.

[13] Maximin is not even strongly separable, as leximin is. On the notion of strong separability, see the discussion in Section 7.

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5. THE LEVELLING DOWN OBJECTION

The feature that apparently exposes egalitarianism, even in its moderate form, to the levelling down objection seems to be that it sets up a separate objective – the principle of equality – in addition to the objective of benefiting people. Hence, by the move from (1) to (2), we get a negative contribution regarding inequality because (2) is worse in respect of inequality than (1). Of course, if we are moderate egalitarians, this is sure to be outweighed by the positive contribution from the increase in mean welfare.

The priority view, on the other hand, only involves the objective of benefiting people. Benefits to the worse off matter more, to be sure, but giving priority to the worse off does not appear as a separate objective. Rather, it is included in the objective of benefiting people, as weights modifying the value of the benefits to people. Hence, on the priority view the move from (1) to (2) does not result in a negative contribution in value.

However, the discussion in Sections 2–3 above points at another possibility. Pluralist egalitarianism was there defined in terms of an ordering of pairs of mean levels of welfare and members of the set of equivalence classes regarding inequality (as given by the principle of equality). This ordering determines how the mean level of welfare in an outcome is to be weighed up against the degree of inequality of its distribution, all things considered.

Along with this ordering comes an equivalent ordering defined directly on the set of distributions, such that one distribution is better than another, all things considered, if and only if its pair of mean welfare and degree of inequality is better, all things considered, than the other's pair. Furthermore, if we are considering a moderate egalitarian view, the ordering of distributions will satisfy the principle of personal good. In this case, egalitarianism is given by a general betterness ordering defined directly on the set of distributions, with weight being given to both increases in the mean of welfare and decreases in inequality.

I believe that these represent two equivalent ways of stating the egalitarian objective. One decomposes the objective into two separate parts: increasing the mean level of welfare (having some weight) and decreasing the degree of inequality of the distribution (having some weight). (Moderate egalitarianism further requires that equality achieved by "levelling down" is always outweighed by the decrease in the mean level of welfare). The other states the objective as a condition governing how a benefit to some person should be valued: this value increases the worse off he is as compared with how well off other people are. (For moderate egalitarianism, though, benefiting a person is always valued positively.)

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This latter definition does not set up the value of inequality as a separate objective. The objective remains to benefit people, and the value of inequality appears through the way in which benefits to people are weighed together. So egalitarianism defined this way does not seem to be exposed to the levelling down objection. There is no way of knowing how, on this ordering, levelling down by moving from (2) to (1) should be "in one way" better.

Does any of these definitions represent egalitarian reasoning better than the others? This is an open question at the present stage – one to which I shall return in the next two sections. For the moment, I merely note that the levelling down objection only arises in connection with the first of these definitions. The objection is forceful, however, only if this definition alone represents egalitarianism. And it seems doubtful that this is the case. This also means that the levelling down objection is not well suited to the job of separating the two views from each other.

The significant difference concerning levelling down *on the level of ordering of distributions* concerns whether or not we accept levelling down as possibly better, all things considered, that is, whether or not we accept the principle of personal good. This difference places strong egalitarianism on one side, and moderate egalitarianism and the priority view on the other. I am, of course, aware of the fact that people accepting the principle of personal good tend to see no force in the levelling down objection.[14] However, my concern here has been the question of whether or not the objection applies in the first place.

6. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MODERATE EGALITARIANISM AND THE PRIORITY VIEW?

Parfit defines (moderate) pluralist egalitarianism and the priority view in such a way that they seem to involve clearly distinct objectives. But presumably they need not disagree on the relative ranking of outcomes. If we believe in equality, one of our objectives will be to reduce inequality. Of course, in reducing inequality by transferring welfare from someone better off to someone worse off (without making the latter at least as well off as the former) we cannot help benefiting the worse off – but this is only a *means* of attaining the objective of reducing inequality. Likewise, if we give priority to the worse off, we cannot help reducing inequality – but this is only an *effect* of attaining the objective of benefiting the worse off.

I shall now show that, on Parfit's definition, the principle of equality may in fact imply an ordering equivalent to the priority view.[15] First, I

[14] See, for instance, Tungodden (2003). Even Temkin (2003), who rejects the principle of personal good, sees no force in the levelling down objection.

[15] Fleurbaey (forthcoming) makes the same point.

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need to show that the priority view implies an inequality index. Thus, for any distribution g, consider the equal distribution g_e that is equally as good according to the priority view (3).[16] If g is unequal, g_e will have a lower mean level of welfare than g. We can treat the difference between the mean levels $\mu_g - \mu_{ge}$ a measure of the waste, so to speak, of mean level of welfare generated by the fact that welfare is not distributed equally. Call this measure $AKS(g)$.[17] It can now be proved that the priority view (3) can be decomposed into

(4) $G_{PV^*}(g) = \mu_g - AKS(g)$.[18]

Any priority view ordering can thus be represented by a function that splits the objective of benefiting people into two separate objectives: increasing the mean level of welfare and reducing the index of the badness of inequality.

Suppose we use this inequality measure to define an inequality ordering (i.e., a version of the principle of equality) and use this in turn to define a version of moderate pluralist egalitarianism equivalent to (4).[19] Nothing Parfit says will prevent us from doing that. But this means, as Fleurbaey (forthcoming) points out, that additively separable orderings equivalent to the priority view are included in Parfit's definition of egalitarianism. (The same goes, of course, for the alternative definition set out in Section 5 because it has implications equivalent to pluralist egalitarianism).

Hence, as long as we do not set up further requirements for egalitarianism, it does not necessarily have consequences different from the priority view. The difference relates to the rationales that can be given for the views. The priority view values equality only instrumentally, whereas an additively separable version of egalitarianism presumably values equality intrinsically.

One could choose to *define* egalitarianism as a position excluding additive separability, Fleurbaey (forthcoming) says. He seems to see no point in doing that. However, I shall pursue this idea in the next section. But before doing this, I shall follow up on another point of Fleurbaey's. Fleurbaey (forthcoming) uses (4) to suggest that the priority view attaches instrumental value to equality. But then, the priority view invites the levelling down objection as well, at least instrumentally. And that might

[16] The existence of this distribution depends on a continuity condition. For further details, see Blackorby and Donaldson (1984).

[17] Of course, this is a well known formula attributable to Atkinson (1969), Kolm (1969) and Sen (1973).

[18] The proof is simple: the function $G_{PV^*}(g) = \mu_{ge}$ is ordinally equivalent to the function $G_{PV}(g)$ in (3). And μ_{ge} can be rewritten as $\mu_g - (\mu_g - \mu_{ge})$, which yields (4).

[19] This procedure is examined in Ebert (1987).

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subject it to criticism similar to that made of egalitarianism. I should like to put this point differently by another use of (4).

Parfit treats the priority view as a condition governing the evaluation of benefiting a person: the evaluation depends only on how well off a beneficiary is, independently of the level of others. However, (4) shows that this objective might be decomposed. We could interpret the *AKS*-measure as a measure of the badness of not giving priority to the worse off. It would then measure the waste of mean welfare level generated by the fact that welfare is not distributed with maximal priority to the worse off.

The levelling down objection apparently applies to statement (4): if we "level down" by moving from distribution (2) to (1), we shall get a positive contribution from -*AKS*, because more priority has been given to the worse off. Hence, "levelling down" is better in one respect (i.e., regarding priority to the worse off).

As with egalitarianism, the priority view can thus be defined in various ways, and the question arises whether any of these definitions represents prioritarian reasoning better than the others. In this case, (3) seems to have the upper hand and (4) seems less apt. Most prioritarians see nothing good in levelling down. What is good, according to the priority view, is that people are benefited. The index says that the good of levelling down consists in the fact that the total welfare is now distributed with maximum priority. But this does not look like much of a benefit to a person.

It might be objected that the value of giving priority is not itself a benefit to a person. If we give a benefit of some size to a worse-off, rather than a better-off person, the total welfare will be the same. The *value* of this benefit will increase, though, but this is not itself a benefit. It is an impersonal value. Only on utilitarianism is all value personal value: overall value can only be increased by increasing the total welfare, hence, any increase in value is necessarily a benefit to someone. Just as with egalitarianism, it is possible for the priority view to separate out the personal and impersonal value components for a distribution. In this case, we get the total welfare on the one hand, and the value of the priority given in the distribution of this total on the other.

Still, I accept that (4) may not represent a convincing definition of the priority view, so I shall not insist on it. I would suggest, however, that it is far from clear what counts as an appropriate definition of a view.

7. EGALITARIANISM AND ADDITIVE SEPARABILITY

Parfit seems to believe that the egalitarian concern with "relativities" – "with how each person's level compares with the level of other people" – is equivalent to the requirement that the principle of equality (i.e., some inequality ordering) is given some weight in (is consistent with)

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all-things-considered judgements. We have just seen that this is not true. The fact that some inequality ordering is given some weight in the all-things-considered ordering is compatible with a prioritarian (i.e., additively separable) ordering which does *not* take account of how well off a person is relative to others.

Let me repeat the quotation from Parfit I gave above. He says:

> I have said that, on the Priority View, we do not believe in equality. [. . .] benefits to the worse off matter more, but that is only because these people are at a lower *absolute* level. It is irrelevant that these people are worse off *than others*. Benefits to them would matter just as much even if there *were* no others who were better off.
>
> The chief difference is, then, this. Egalitarians are concerned with relativities: with how each person's level compares with the level of other people. On the Priority View, we are concerned only with people's absolute levels. (1995, pp. 22–3)

When Parfit says that, according to the priority view, it matters as much to benefit people on a certain level, irrespective of the level other people are at, he means it matters as much in terms of numerical representation. Since the priority view can be represented by a function of the *additively separable* form (3), a given benefit to a person will have the same numerical weight in the representation, regardless of the levels of others.

As I understand him, Parfit implies that this is *not* the case with egalitarianism. Egalitarianism is concerned with "relativities", so the value of a given benefit to a person will *not* have the same numerical weight in the representation, regardless of the levels of others; it will be dependent on the levels of the others. This suggests that we should define egalitarianism as a position excluding additive separability: more precisely, as a position which satisfies some egalitarian requirement, say, the Pigou–Dalton condition on transfer but is *not* additively separable like the priority view. Moderate egalitarianism should be defined as egalitarianism that satisfies the principle of personal good.

As indicated earlier, Fleurbaey (forthcoming) disagrees. He prefers to stick to "the broader, and somewhat more conventional, definition" in terms of the principle of equality. For him, it is possible to be an egalitarian and, at the same time, endorse an additively separable ordering of outcomes. Of course, he is free to use the term "egalitarianism" in this way. However, his definition stems from Parfit (1995) and Temkin (1993), both of whom see the defining characteristic of egalitarianism in its concern for how well off a person is relative to others; and my definition appears better to capture the notion that egalitarianism is concerned with relativities, and therefore it seems better to capture Parfit's and Temkin's

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intentions.[20] Apart from that, it seems to me desirable to define the views in a way that implies disagreement on the ranking of alternatives rather than on reasons only.[21] But what is the significance of this disagreement?

Suppose (assuming that there are only three persons) we have one unit of benefit to give to the first person. Then compare these two sets of alternatives:

$\boldsymbol{a}$: (2, 4, 4) $\boldsymbol{b}$: (3, 4, 4)

$\boldsymbol{c}$: (2, 1, 1) $\boldsymbol{d}$: (3, 1, 1)

The Gini social welfare function (here defined in connection with distributions of welfare) is an instance of a function representing moderate egalitarianism (Blackorby and Donaldson, 1978, p. 69):[22]

$$(5)\quad G_{ME}(\boldsymbol{g}) = 1/\mathrm{n}^2[g_1 + 3g_2 + \ldots + (2i-1)g_i + \ldots + (2n-1)g_n],$$
$$g_1 \geq g_2 \geq \ldots \geq g_n.$$

If we apply (5) to the distributions above, we get:

$$G_{ME}(\boldsymbol{b}) - G_{ME}(\boldsymbol{a}) = 1/9[(4 + 12 + 15) - (4 + 12 + 10)] = 0,56$$
$$G_{ME}(\boldsymbol{d}) - G_{ME}(\boldsymbol{c}) = 1/9[(3 + 3 + 5) - (2 + 3 + 3)] = 0,33$$

Here, the numerical value of one unit of benefit is not the same in both cases. However, since function (5) satisfies the principle of personal good, we can be sure that it will always favour giving one unit of benefit to some person while keeping the others on the same level, and it will do so independently of the actual level of these others.

It follows that moderate egalitarianism will *order* benefits to one person, while keeping other persons constant, in exactly the same way as the priority view, but it will not give this benefit the same numerical representation in all cases. Thus, the difference in numerical representation makes no difference at the level of *ordering* distributions in this case. This reflects the fact that moderate egalitarianism satisfies the principle

[20] Tungodden (2003) furthermore suggests that egalitarianism is compatible with equality promotion within the group involved in a conflict about distribution, regardless of the level of the unaffected people. Again, it is possible to use "egalitarianism" in this way. However, it conflicts with the account given by Parfit (1995) and Temkin (1993), according to which egalitarianism is universal in scope. From this it follows that egalitarianism is concerned with how well off a person is relative to everyone else. Moreover, the quotation from Nagel, which Tungodden gives in support of his suggestion, appears to me to be a clear example of prioritarian reasoning (Nagel, 1979, p. 117).

[21] In this, I am in agreement with John Broome (1991 and forthcoming). However, he relies on a context with uncertainty in his characterization of the difference in implications.

[22] Other functions with the same properties would be the family of generalized Gini functions, where instead of the weights $1, 3, \ldots, 2n-1$, the weights are only restricted to being non-decreasing (Donaldson and Weymark, 1980).

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of personal good. And this principle turns out to imply the condition of *weak separability* (Broome, 1991, p. 206). Let me explain.

Suppose we have a betterness ordering of the set of alternative distributions for n persons. Consider some subset of persons. The overall betterness ordering entails a conditional ordering of this subset of persons for fixed choices of welfare level in the remaining group of persons. The subset of persons is said to be *separable* in the ordering if the conditional ordering is the same for all choices of welfare level in the remaining group of persons.

The condition known as *weak separability* of the betterness ordering is that each person is separable. The condition *strong separability* is that each *subset* of persons is separable. The condition of *additive separability* entails that of strong separability. Moderate egalitarianism is weakly separable. However, the fact that on the function (3) representing the priority view a benefit to some person will have the same numerical representation in all cases, reflects the fact that the priority view is additively separable. So the difference between moderate egalitarianism and the priority view is given by the difference between weak and strong separability. They agree, therefore, that when the level of all other persons is fixed, the *ordering* of what happens to *one* person is independent of the actual level of the others.

At the level of *ordering* of alternatives, the difference between moderate egalitarianism and the priority view can only be detected if we compare some *group* of persons. According to moderate egalitarianism, the ordering of benefits to this group might be dependent on the fixed levels of the other people, whereas this possibility is excluded by the priority view. Consider this example:

$\boldsymbol{e}$: (5, 1, 1) $\quad$ $\boldsymbol{f}$: (3, 2, 1)

$\boldsymbol{g}$: (5, 1, 7) $\quad$ $\boldsymbol{h}$: (3, 2, 7)

The first two persons receive 5 and 1, respectively, in $\boldsymbol{e}$ and $\boldsymbol{g}$, whereas they receive 3 and 2, respectively, in $\boldsymbol{f}$ and $\boldsymbol{h}$. The third person is fixed at 1 in $\boldsymbol{e}$ and $\boldsymbol{f}$, whereas he is fixed at 7 in $\boldsymbol{g}$ and $\boldsymbol{h}$. On the priority view, the ordering of (5, 1, ·) vs. (3, 2, ·) is the same, independently of the level of the third person. This is not necessarily so on moderate egalitarianism.

For example, if $w(x) = \sqrt{x}$ in (3), we get for the priority view:

$$G_{PV}(\boldsymbol{f}) - G_{PV}(\boldsymbol{e}) = (1,73 + 1, 41 + 1) - (2, 24 + 1 + 1) = -0, 10$$

$$G_{PV}(\boldsymbol{h}) - G_{PV}(\boldsymbol{g}) = (1,73 + 1, 41 + 2, 65) - (2, 24 + 1 + 2, 65) = -0, 10$$

Using (5) for moderate egalitarianism, we get:

$$G_{ME}(\boldsymbol{f}) - G_{ME}(\boldsymbol{e}) = 1/9[(3 + 6 + 5) - (5 + 3 + 5)] = 0, 11$$

$$G_{ME}(\boldsymbol{h}) - G_{ME}(\boldsymbol{g}) = 1/9[(7 + 9 + 10) - (7 + 15 + 5)] = -0, 11.$$

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In this case, the moderate egalitarian view orders (5, 1, ·) vs. (3, 2, ·) differently for different levels of the third person.

This possibility within moderate egalitarian views brings out a clear difference with the priority view. However, it is not at all easy to judge the ethical significance of this difference. The two views agree in ordering ***f*** above ***e***, but they disagree about the relative merits of ***g*** and ***h***. More generally, for any instance of the priority view and moderate egalitarianism, there must be at least one case in which a subset of persons is ordered differently.[23] What should we think of that?

Note that this difference can only be stated in terms of betterness orderings of outcomes. Hence, the relevant definition of egalitarianism defines it in terms of how a benefit to some person should be valued: this value increases the worse off he is relative to other people. But the levelling down objection does not apply to this definition of egalitarianism, so the argument in favour of the priority view directed at the person initially attracted to (moderate) egalitarianism is no longer available. In order to convince the egalitarian to embrace the priority view, an argument should now be given to the effect that a pair of alternatives for *any* subgroup of persons must be ordered in the same way, independently of the fixed level of other persons. Clearly, this property is implied by the priority view as defined here. But as far as I can see, Parfit has not presented an argument that explains why it should be so important to an egalitarian, as opposed to just weak separability, that it should move him to the priority view.[24]

8. CONCLUSION

To sum up, I have shown (Section 2) that Parfit's original definition of egalitarianism (i.e., the principle of equality) implicitly assumes a context, and that this context consists in a list of morally relevant factors and the requirement that the inequality ordering implied by the principle of equality is consistent with the ordering of outcomes, all things considered.

[23] If we consider a context with uncertainty, there turns out to be a more significant difference between our views. For, in such a context, moderate egalitarianism, but not the priority view, conflicts with the principle of personal good (defined on uncertain prospects). Still, this difference is only significant given risk neutrality about overall good. So even here, the difference is a subtle one (see the discussion in Broome, 1991, pp. 185–92, 199 and forthcoming). Wlodek Rabinowicz (2001) argues that the priority view is best understood as not satisfying the principle of personal good for uncertain prospects either. However, he agrees with Broome that the example in Table 22 (Broome, 1991, p. 185) does separate the two views.

[24] John Broome has argued that the priority view cannot give meaning to quantities of welfare independently of the weight they have in overall betterness (see Broome, 1991, Ch. 10). In Jensen (1995) I have tried to strengthen this argument, showing that the difficulty is a problem of measurement rather than a question of meaning. Wlodek Rabinowicz (2001) objects to one of the premises of this kind of argument (see note 23).

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We should specify this context if (like Temkin, 1993) we want to explore the precise content of egalitarianism. What Parfit calls pluralist egalitarianism is a case of an egalitarian view in which the context is made explicit (Section 3).

Parfit uses the levelling down objection to drive a wedge between egalitarianism and the priority view. However, once the context of the principle of equality is made clear, for instance, in terms of a pluralist egalitarian view, an equivalent version of egalitarianism can be defined in terms of conditions placed directly on the outcomes that require the value of benefiting a person to increase the worse off he is relative to others. This requirement seems to be no less egalitarian than the principle of equality as a separate objective. Now, the levelling down objection only arises if egalitarianism is defined in terms of the principle of equality. Therefore, it is not capable of separating egalitarianism and the priority view (Section 5).

I have also shown that, when it is defined in terms of the principle of equality, egalitarianism is in fact compatible with an additively separable ordering characteristic of the priority view (Section 6). I argued both that it better suits Parfit's own intentions and that it is more useful to define egalitarianism so that it excludes additive separability. The levelling down objection does not arise once this definition is adopted. Moderate egalitarianism implies weak separability. I have further demonstrated what the difference between weak and additive separability amounts to, namely: for any instance of the priority view and moderate egalitarianism, there must be at least one case in which they order a subset of persons differently. It is not clear whether this difference can be used, as Parfit uses the levelling down objection, to oblige the moderate egalitarian to accept the priority view (Section 7).

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