

IS EQUALITY VALUABLE?

BIG QUESTIONS IN PHILOSOPHY LECTURE SERIES

PIETRO INTROPI

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN



Dr. Pietro Intropi

Research Fellow in Philosophy
Trinity College Dublin

Research Interests: contemporary political philosophy; the values of freedom and reciprocity in a theory of distributive justice

E: INTROPIP@tcd.ie

ERC Project: “Rights and Egalitarianism - REAL” (PI: Prof. Adina Preda)

“REAL aims to propose a framework that accommodates rights within an egalitarian theory of justice and show that rights and equality are not only compatible but also mutually supportive”



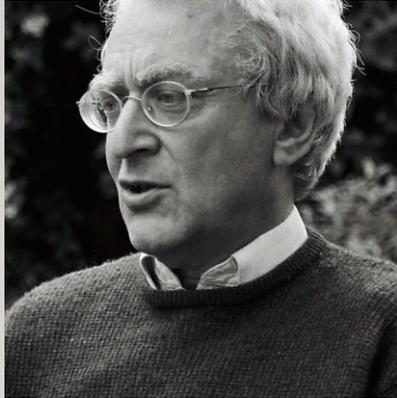
Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Is Equality Valuable?

EGALITARIANISM

A cluster of views that are committed to equality (or to disapprove of inequality)
(e.g. equal treatment, equal distribution of goods, equal consideration of interests).

DISTRIBUTIVE EQUALITY



Justice and distributive equality:

“I take for granted that there is something which justice requires people to have equal amounts of”

(G.A. Cohen 1989: 906)

- An inquiry into the *value* of equality: we want to understand whether equality is *good*/inequality is *bad*.
- What is that ‘something’ that is valuable to have in equal amounts? resources, income, educational opportunities, freedom, power, authority, etc.

DISTRIBUTIVE EQUALITY

Is distributive equality good/inequality bad?

S1	S2
A: 10	A: 14
B: 10	B: 6

Example: equal (educational) opportunities for children



INEQUALITIES IN LIFE EXPECTANCY

Between countries: “In the U.S., life expectancy for men is 74.2 years; in China, it is 70.4 years; but in Malawi, it is only 37.1 years.” (Scanlon 2018: 11)

Within a single country: “In the 10 percent of counties in the U.S. with greatest life expectancy 77 percent of white men live to age 70, while only 68 percent of black men born in those counties live to that age. In the 10 percent of counties with lowest life expectancy things are even worse. 61 percent of white men born in those counties live to age 70 but only 45 percent of black men.” (Scanlon 2018: 12)

ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

... very unequal distributions of wealth, extreme income inequality.

S3

A, B, C: 303

D, E, F, ... Z : 1, 1, 1, ...

“In 1965 the average compensation of executives in the 350 largest firms in the U.S. was twenty times the average compensation of workers in those firms. In the last decades of the twentieth century, this ratio grew rapidly, and reached a high of 376 to 1 in 2000. In 2014 it was still 303 to 1 [...]” (Scanlon 2018: 7-8; Ch. 9)

CLARIFICATIONS ABOUT EQUALITY

- You may think that an unequal distribution is bad when and because some are worse-off than others ‘through no fault of theirs’ (e.g. Segall 2016; Temkin 2000).
- Distributive equality is a *comparative* notion: “Equality describes a relation obtaining between people that is *essentially comparative*. People are more or less equal *relative to one another*” (Temkin 2000: 129)

NON-INSTRUMENTAL (INTRINSIC)/INSTRUMENTAL VALUE

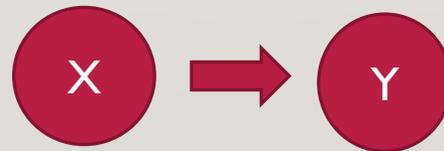
Non-Instrumental (Intrinsic) Value:

The value that something has *in itself* (valuing something for its own sake). Example: happiness.



Instrumental Value:

The value that something has as a means to achieve something else. Examples: tools.



NON-INSTRUMENTAL (INTRINSIC)/ INSTRUMENTAL EGALITARIANISM (PARFIT, TEMKIN)

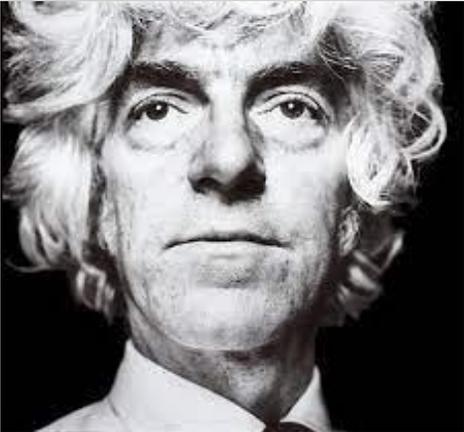
Non-Instrumental (Intrinsic) Egalitarians value equality for its own sake, as an end in itself.



Instrumental Egalitarians value equality as a means to achieve something else (peace, fraternity, happiness) (or as a component of something else) of value.



TELIC EGALITARIANISM (TE)



- TE is a view about the value of equality: on such a view, “when we should aim for equality, that is because we shall thereby make the outcome better.” (Parfit, “Equality or Priority?”: 84)
- On TE equality is intrinsically valuable. Indeed, TE is committed to:

“The Principle of Equality: It is in itself bad if some people are worse off than others.”
- Telic/Deontic Distinction: “On the Telic View, inequality is bad; on the Deontic View, it is unjust” (90).

THE SCOPE OBJECTION

The Scope Objection challenges the plausibility of believing that inequality is bad when it occurs between individuals *that are completely unrelated*.

Divided Worlds

S4

S5

A: 10

A: 14

B: 10

B: 6

Suppose that there are no relations between A and B (nor there could be): perhaps A and B live on two distinct planets and are actually unaware of each other's existence (or they live in two different ages). Why should we think it bad that an inequality exists between them?

E.g.: Why should we think it bad if, unbeknownst to us, there are alien species who live lives that are much more fulfilling than ours? Why should we think it bad "if Inca peasants, or Stone Age hunter-gatherers, were worse off than we are now.?" (88)

THE LEVELLING DOWN OBJECTION (LDO)

LDO: “If inequality is bad, its disappearance must be in one way a change for the better, *however this change occurs*. Suppose that those who are better off suffer some misfortune, so that they become as badly off as everyone else. Since these events would remove the inequality, they must be in one way welcome, on the Telic View, even though they would be worse for some people, and better for no one. This implication seems to many to be quite absurd.” (98)

S6	S7
A: 16	A: 8
B: 8	B: 8

How can there be anything good in the move from S6 to S7?

TWO QUESTIONS FOR EGALITARIANS

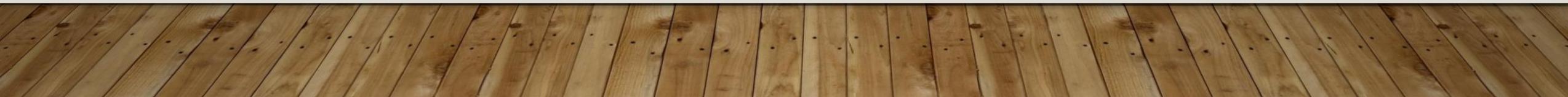
1) Are Egalitarians committed to level down? And, if so, is Egalitarianism implausible for that reason?

2) Is it true that equality has no value in cases involving levelling down?

PRIORITARIANISM (PARFIT)

- For Parfit we should reject TE and endorse prioritarianism (The Priority View).
- LDO purports to show that equality is not *always* valuable: in cases involving LDO it may be disvaluable.
- What really matters is improving the conditions of the worse-off: we should focus on benefiting the worse-off (rather than on reducing inequalities per se) (Prioritarianism/The Priority View).

“The Priority View: Benefiting people matters more the worse off these people are.” (101)



PRIORITARIANISM AND EGALITARIANISM

“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.” (104)

S6	S7	S8	S9
A: 16	A: 8	A: 14	A: 25
B: 8	B: 8	B: 10	B: 9

SUFFICIENTARIANISM

What matters is that nobody falls below a (minimal) threshold of advantage (e.g. everybody's needs are met; everyone has decent (educational) opportunities ...).

Sufficientarianism: “What is important from the point of view of morality is not that everyone should have *the same* but that each should have *enough*.” (Frankfurt 1987: 21-22).

Example: inequalities between Rich and Super Rich (Crisp 2003).

Limitarianism: what is bad is that some have too much of a certain valuable goods (Robeyns 2017)

EGALITARIAN ANSWERS: THE PLURALIST REPLY

Egalitarians can say that there is *some* value in equality (even when equality is achieved by levelling down), but that equality is not all that matters:

- Equality is one value among others (pluralism about value).
- Therefore, egalitarians can maintain that equality has some value even in cases involving levelling down, but that egalitarians would not necessarily be committed to level down, since the value of equality can be trumped by other values (e.g. wellbeing) (Temkin 2000).
- E.g. consider cases involving a conflict between equality and wellbeing (LDO). A concern with wellbeing (with avoiding a sharp decrease in the wellbeing of the better-off in order to bring them to the level of the worse-off) can outweigh the egalitarian reason to bring about more equality.
- If so, in such cases egalitarians would not be committed to level down.

CHALLENGING THE SLOGAN (TEMKIN)

However, the point of LDO is to challenge the idea that there is *any* value in bringing about a more equal outcome by levelling down (i.e. by making some worse off and no-one better off).

How can there be *anything good* in a situation in which nobody is made better off, and actually some are worse off?

S6	S7
A: 16	A: 8
B: 8	B: 8

LDO is premised on The Slogan: “One situation *cannot* be worse (or better) than another if there is *no one* for whom it is worse (or better).” (Temkin 2000: 132)

SAINTS AND SINNERS/ PROPORTIONAL JUSTICE (TEMKIN)

S10	S11
Saints: 15 Sinners: 3	Saints: 15 Sinners: 20

- S10 and S11 represent the quality of people's afterlives: in S10 the Sinners have afterlives that are much worse than those of the Saints, while in S11 the Sinners lead afterlives that are much better than those of the Saints.
- We believe that the saints' afterlives should go better than those of the sinners. Therefore, S10 is better (more valuable) than S11.
- If this is true, The Slogan is defeated: there are situations in which an outcome can be better (more valuable), even if it is not better for anyone (even if nobody benefits, and actually some are worse off).
- By analogy, also equality can have this type of value: there is something good about eliminating inequalities, even if this makes no one better off. Especially, this applies to *undeserved* inequalities ...

NON-INTRINSIC EGALITARIANISM (O'NEILL)

Equality can be valuable for instrumental reasons: for Non-Intrinsic (Instrumental) Egalitarians, reducing inequalities is valuable in virtue of its positive effects (rather than as an end in itself). In particular, because it contributes to improve social relations:

Inequality “(b) creates stigmatizing differences in status, whereby the badly-off feel like, and are treated as, inferiors; (c) creates objectionable relations of power and domination; (d) weakens self-respect (especially of the worst-off); (e) creates servility and deferential behavior; and (f) undermines healthy fraternal social relations” (O’Neill 2008: 126)

THE STATUS-HARMS OF INEQUALITY

“Significant political and economic inequalities are often associated with inequalities of social status that encourage those of lower status to be viewed both by themselves and by others as inferior. This may arouse widespread attitudes of deference and servility on one side and a will to dominate and arrogance on the other. These effects of social and economic inequalities can be serious evils and the attitudes they engender great vices” (Rawls 2001: 131)

The negative aim of Non-Intrinsic Egalitarianism consists in the elimination of objectionable status hierarchies, of domination, etc..

The positive aim of this form of egalitarianism is to *achieve a society of equals*.

According to O’Neill, reducing inequalities (i.e. distributive equality) is instrumentally valuable as a means to achieve *a society of equals* (i.e. other aims associated with egalitarianism)



RELATIONAL EQUALITY

According to relational egalitarians, the main egalitarian aim should be that of achieving a society of equals: a society that aims to secure people's equal standing, and in which people can relate as equals.



According to E. Anderson, “Negatively, egalitarians seek to abolish oppression – that is, forms of social relationship by which some people dominate, exploit, marginalize, demean, and inflict violence upon others. [...] Positively, egalitarians seek a social order in which persons stand in relations of equality. They seek to live together in a democratic community, as opposed to a hierarchical one.” (Anderson 1999: 313)

RELATIONAL EQUALITY AND DISTRIBUTIVE EQUALITY

“Democratic equality is what I shall call a relational theory of equality: it views equality as a social relationship. [...] Certain patterns in the distribution of goods may be instrumental to securing such relationships, follow from them, or even be constitutive of them. But democratic egalitarians are fundamentally concerned with the relationships within which goods are distributed, not only with the distribution of goods themselves.” (313-314)

For relational egalitarians a certain (e.g. an egalitarian) distribution of goods is subordinate to the achievement of relational equality: what really matters – what is intrinsically valuable – is relational equality, and distributive equality is at best non-intrinsically (e.g. instrumentally) valuable for the achievement of relational equality.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

- What is the point of equality? Which kind of equality really matters? Distributive equality, relational equality...?
- What is the relationship between distributive and relational equality? Is distributive equality valuable in itself, or is it valuable in so far as it contributes to the achievement of other ideals (e.g. relational equality)?
- Should we be egalitarians or endorse some other distributive rule (e.g. priority, sufficiency?)

Thank you for listening!

WORKS CITED:

- E. Anderson (1999), “What Is the Point of Equality?” *Ethics* 109 (1999): 287–337.
- M. Clayton and A. Williams (2000) (eds.), *The Ideal of Equality*, New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- G.A. Cohen (1989), “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice,” *Ethics* 99, no. 4: 906–944.
- R. Crisp (2003), “Equality, Priority, and Compassion,” *Ethics* 113: 745–63.
- C. Fourie, F. Schuppert and I. Wallimann-Helmer (2015) (eds.), *Social Equality. On What It Means To Be Equals*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- H. Frankfurt (1987), “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” *Ethics* 98: 21–43.
- M. O’Neill (2008), ‘What Should Egalitarians Believe?’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36.2: 119-156.

-
- D. Parfit, “Equality or Priority?”, in M. Clayton and A. Williams (eds.) (2000): 81-125.
 - Rawls, J. (2001). *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
 - Robeyns, I. (2017), “Having Too Much”, in J. Knight and M. Schwartzberg (eds.) *NOMOS LVI: Wealth. Yearbook of the American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy*, New York University Press, available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2736094.
 - T. Scanlon (2018), *Why Does Inequality Matter?* New York: Oxford University Press.
 - S. Segall (2016), *Why Inequality Matters. Luck-Egalitarianism, Its Meaning and Value*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 - L. Temkin (2000), “Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection”, in M. Clayton and A. Williams (eds.) (2000), 126-161.