The Value of Equality and Egalitarianism

Lecture 1:
The levelling down objection

§1. What is egalitarianism?

Egalitarianism is the view that equality is valuable... But this raises a host of questions...

Equality of what is valuable...? Equality between whom is valuable...? Equality is valuable in what sense...?

According to telic egalitarianism... equality is valuable in the sense that it is a good thing... It is something to be promoted or pursued...

According to deontic egalitarianism... equality is something to be respected... It is a side-constraint on our pursuit of good things...

If equality is a good thing, is this because it is a means to something else that is a good thing, or because it is an ingredient in something else that is a good thing...?

§1. The levelling down objection

T1 ‘...the British intelligentsia turned against this country after World War II and decided to remake society from scratch... It wanted to create a brave new world without any divisions between people and with everyone on the same level... This obsession with not separating sheep from goats has caused the dumbing-down and leveling-down that have crippled the life chances of countless thousands of children, the vast majority of them from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.’

(Melanie Phillips in the Daily Mail, 2008)

Theresa and Jeremy are the sole occupants of a desert island... If they don't work together, Jeremy has a happier life than Theresa....

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Don’t work together</th>
<th>Work together</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
P1 If egalitarianism is true then it is better if Theresa and Jeremy work together.
P2 It is \textit{not} better if Theresa and Jeremy work together.
C Egalitarianism is false.

\textit{Monist egalitarianism} \quad \textit{There is only one good thing, viz. equality of happiness.}

\textit{Pluralist egalitarianism} \quad \textit{One of the good things is equality of happiness.}

P1 Equality of X is a good thing only if X is itself a good thing.
P2 If \textit{monist egalitarianism} is true then equality of happiness is a good thing but happiness is not itself a good thing.
C \textit{Monist egalitarianism} is false.

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
 & Don’t work together & Work together \\
\hline
Theresa & 44 & 30 \\
Jeremy & 31 & 30 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

Why accept P2…?

P2a It isn’t better for either Theresa or Jeremy if they work together.
P2b It is better if Theresa and Jeremy work together only if it is better for either Theresa or Jeremy if they work together.

\textit{Person Affecting Principle}…

T2 ‘One of two outcomes cannot be worse if this outcome would be worse for no one.’

\hspace{1cm} (Derek Parfit, \textit{Future People}, p.118)

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
 & Us & Our descendants if we conserve resources & Our descendants if we don’t conserve resources \\
\hline
We conserve resources & 8 & 8 & - \\
We don’t conserve resources & 10 & - & 1 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

P1 It isn’t worse for anybody if we don’t conserve resources.
P2 It is worse if we don’t conserve resources.
C It is not the case that it is worse if we don’t conserve resources only if it is worse for somebody if we don’t conserve resources.

A weaker principle… If we are comparing two outcomes involving \textit{all and only the same people}… one outcome cannot be worse if this outcome would be worse for no one.
§3. Priority

Prioritarianism

T3  ‘Benefiting people matters more the worse off these people are.’

(Derek Parfit, *Equality and Priority*, p.213)

Why think that equality of happiness is valuable… if we can explain our *prima facie* egalitarian beliefs just as well by appealing to the claim that… someone being happier makes less of a moral difference the happier they are in absolute terms…?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Treatment A</th>
<th>Treatment B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Condition 1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition 2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

§4. Sufficiency

Sufficientarianism

T4  ‘With respect to the distribution of economic assets, what is important from the point of view of morality is not that everyone should have the same… but that each should have enough.’

(Harry Frankfurt, *Equality as a Moral Ideal*, p.134)

T5  ‘…absolute priority is to be given to benefits to those below the threshold... Below the threshold, benefiting people matters more the worse off those people are... Above the threshold, or in cases concerning only trivial benefits below the threshold, no priority is to be given.’

(Roger Crisp, *Equality, Priority, and Compassion*, p.758)

The Beverly Hills case… We can either give Château Lafite 1982 to ten rich people or we can give Château Latour 1982 to ten thousand super-rich people…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>10 rich people</th>
<th>10000 super-rich people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lafite 1982 to the rich people</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latour 1982 to the super-rich people</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
P1 If either egalitarianism or prioritarianism is true then there is at least a reason to give the Lafite 1982 to the rich people.
P2 There is no reason to give the Lafite 1982 to the rich people.
C Neither egalitarianism nor prioritarianism is true.

References