The Value of Equality and Egalitarianism

Lecture 1:
The levelling down objection
The plan for today...

1. What is egalitarianism?

2. The levelling down objection

3. Priority

4. Sufficiency
§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*...?
Equality of what is valuable...?

Is it valuable that everybody has equally many letters in their name...?

Is it valuable that everybody is equally tall...?

Is it valuable that everybody is equally happy...?

Is it valuable that everybody has the same rights...?
Equality *of what* is valuable...?

Is it valuable that everybody has the same *resources*...?

Is it valuable that everybody has the same *capabilities*...?

Is it valuable that everybody has the same *opportunities*...?
Equality *between whom* is valuable...?

This question has both a *spatial* dimension...

...and a *temporal* dimension...
Should we just care about inequalities between British people...?

Or should we also care about inequalities between British people and Congolese people...?

What about inequalities between earthlings and extra-terrestrials...?
Should we just care about inequalities between people who are alive at this moment...?

Or should we also care about the inequalities between our generation and our parents’ generation...?

What about inequalities between us and cavemen...?
Equality is valuable \textit{in what sense}...?

According to \textit{telic egalitarianism}...

Equality is valuable in the sense that it is a \textit{good thing}...

...it is something to be \textit{promoted} or \textit{pursued}...
According to *deontic egalitarianism*...

Equality is something to be *respected*...

...a *side-constraint* on our pursuit of good things...

Inequality *wrongs* people...
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...?

Or is it good in itself...?
So there are all sorts of possible versions of egalitarianism...

Super-global telic intrinsic welfare egalitarianism...

It is *good in itself*...

...if everybody *everywhere* and *everywhen*...

...is equally *happy*...
§2. The levelling down objection
‘...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>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If Theresa and Jeremy work together, they are equally happy...

...but they are much less happy overall...

<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>
The levelling down objection...

P1 If egalitarianism is true then it is better if Theresa and Jeremy work together.

P2 It is not better if Theresa and Jeremy work together.

C Egalitarianism is false.
Monist egalitarianism

There is *only one* good thing...

...viz. equality of happiness.

Pluralist egalitarianism

One of the good things is equality of happiness.
The levelling down objection...

P1 If egalitarianism is true it is better if Theresa and Jeremy work together.

P2 It is not better if Theresa and Jeremy work together.

C Egalitarianism is false.
C Monist egalitarianism is false.
Monist egalitarianism isn’t plausible anyway...

P1 Equality of X is a good thing only if X is itself a good thing.

P2 If monist egalitarianism is true then equality of happiness is a good thing but happiness is not itself a good thing.

C Monist egalitarianism is false.
An economic indifference curve...  An ethical indifference curve...

Ice cream

Happiness

Cookies

Equality of happiness
A pluralist egalitarian will think there are some cases where a loss of happiness is compensated by a gain in equality…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Don’t work together</th>
<th>Work together</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The levelling down objection...

P1  If egalitarianism is true then it is better if Theresa and Jeremy work together.

P2  It is *not* better if Theresa and Jeremy work together.

C   Egalitarianism is false.
Why accept P2...

P2  It is *not* better if Theresa and Jeremy work together.

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.
Person Affecting Principle...

‘One of two outcomes cannot be worse if this outcome would be worse for no one.’ (Derek Parfit, *Future People*, p.118)

An egalitarian thinks it is worse if Theresa and Jeremy don’t work together, even though this is worse for nobody...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Us</th>
<th>Our descendants if we conserve resources</th>
<th>Our descendants if we don’t conserve resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We conserve resources</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We don’t conserve resources</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why the *Person Affecting Principle* is false...

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 all and only the same people...

...one outcome cannot be worse if this outcome would be worse for no one.

This is *prima facie* plausible...

And it supports P2 of the levelling down objection.
The levelling down objection isn’t just an objection against egalitarianism...

Suppose you think that beauty or knowledge is good...

There will be some cases where you think a loss of happiness is compensated by a gain in knowledge or beauty...
§3. Priority
Prioritarianism

‘Benefiting people matters more the worse off these people are.’
(Derek Parfit, *Equality and Priority*, p.213)

A given increase in happiness is more morally significant the lower the starting point...
Diminishing marginal utility of a good...

Happiness

Ice cream
Diminishing marginal goodness of utility...
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...?

Isn’t this what really matters...?
Suppose a person is going to come down with either one of two equiprobable conditions...

Suppose we can administer only one of two possible treatments...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition 1</th>
<th>Treatment A</th>
<th>Treatment B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition 2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Expected utility if we administer treatment A is $0.5 \times 100 + 0.5 \times 10 = 55$.

Expected utility if we administer treatment B is $0.5 \times 90 + 0.5 \times 20 = 55$. 
If *Prioritarianism* is true then it is better if we administer treatment B...

Now suppose it’s ten people half of whom will come down with each condition and we can only administer one treatment to all ten...

Doesn’t this make a moral difference...?

It doesn’t if *Prioritarianism* is true...