The Value of Equality

Lecture 1: The Levelling Down Objection

§1. Questions about the value of equality

The claim that equality is valuable raises a host of questions…

1. Equality of what is valuable?
2. Equality between whom is valuable?
3. Equality has what kind of value?

As a result, there are many possible egalitarianisms…

1. Resource egalitarianism, welfare egalitarianism.
2. Local egalitarianism, global egalitarianism, super-global egalitarianism.
3. Intrinsic telic egalitarianism, extrinsic telic egalitarianism, deontic egalitarianism.
4. Constructivist egalitarianism, non-constructivist egalitarianism

§2. The simple leveling 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)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Actual world</th>
<th>Other possible world</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
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For a utilitarian, the actual world is no less good than this other possible world.

For an egalitarian, the other possible world is better than the actual world.
P1  If equality of happiness is good, then the other possible world is better than the actual world.

P2  The actual world is better than the other possible world.

C   Equality of happiness is not good.

We need to distinguish the claim that equality of happiness is good from the claim that equality of happiness is the only thing that is good.

We can consistently claim that equality of happiness is good and that happiness is good. We can be pluralists about the good.

Why would equality of happiness be good if happiness were not also good?

§3. The sophisticated leveling down objection

P1  If equality of happiness is good, then there is at least one respect in which the other possible world is better than the actual world.

P2  There is no respect in which the other possible world is better than the actual world.

C   Equality of happiness is not good.

The Person Affecting Principle

If there is no one for whom the other possible world is better than the actual world, then there can be no respect in which the other possible world is better than the actual world.

But there is an objection to this principle…

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<tr>
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<th>Actual world</th>
<th>Other possible world</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
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P1  There is nobody for whom the other possible world is better than the actual world.

P2  If there is no one for whom the other possible world is better than the actual world, then there can be no respect in which the other possible world is better than the actual world.

C   There is no respect in which the other possible world is better than the actual world.

Could we reject P1?

Could we revise the Person Affecting Principle so that it only covers worlds containing the same people?
Another response to the objection available to egalitarians is to look for *companions in guilt*.

If you think that beauty is good, or that knowledge is good, aren’t you going to be open to exactly similar objections…?

Any plausible version of the leveling down objection is going to rest on a substantive assumption about the nature of value…

§4. The priority/sufficiency objection

T2 ‘Benefiting people matters more the worse off these people are.’

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

How much better things are made by giving someone an additional unit of happiness depends on how much happiness this person already has. Compare the idea of the diminishing marginal utility of a good…

T3 ‘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)

Whether or not giving someone an additional unit of happiness makes things better depends on whether or not this person has reached a particular threshold of happiness.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disease A</th>
<th>Disease B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment 1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment 2</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>20</td>
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Suppose I know I am about to come down with one of two diseases, with equal probability. Suppose I can take one of two treatments. Prioritarians must say that the ethical decision is to take treatment 2. Egalitarians need not say this.

§5. Looking ahead: luck egalitarianism

T4 ‘…my own animating conviction in political philosophy with respect to justice is a conviction about distributive justice in particular. It is that an unequal distribution, whose inequality cannot be vindicated by some choice or fault or desert on the part of (some of) the relevant affected agents, is unfair, and, therefore, pro tanto, unjust, and nothing can remove that particular injustice.’

(Jerry Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, p.7)