Outline

1. Introduction: questions about the value of equality
2. The simple leveling down objection
3. The sophisticated leveling down objection
4. The priority/sufficiency objection
5. Looking ahead: luck egalitarianism
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?**
Questions about the value of equality

Equality of what…?

Equality of happiness?
Equality of income and wealth?
Equality of opportunity?
Equality of resources?
Equality of capabilities?
Equality of access to advantage?
Questions about the value of equality

Equality between whom...?

The space question...

Should we care about inequalities between people in the UK and people in Malawi, or should we just care about the inequalities between people in the UK?

Should we care about inequalities between people on Planet Earth and people on other faraway planets, or should we just care about the inequalities between people on Planet Earth?
Questions about the value of equality

The *time* question…

Should we care about the inequalities between people in our generation and people in our parents’ generation, or should we just care about the inequalities between people in our generation?

Should we care about the inequalities between people alive today and cavemen, or between people alive today and the people who will be alive in a hundred years, or should we just care about the inequalities between people alive today?
Questions about the value of equality

*What kind of value...?*

According to telic egalitarianism... it would be *better* if there were equality.

Egalitarianism as a theory of the *good*.

According to deontic egalitarianism... people are *wronged* by inequality.

Egalitarianism as a theory of the *right*. 

Questions about the value of equality

*What kind of value...?*

Is equality good because it is a condition of something else that is good?

Is it extrinsically good?

Is equality good, and not just because it is a condition of something else that is good?

Is it intrinsically good?
Questions about the value of equality

*What kind of value*...?

Is the value of equality constructed?

We can’t choose whether or not things are valuable. Some things *just are* valuable. And one of those things is equality.

We *can* decide whether or not things are valuable. And it is rational for us to choose equality as one of those things. Equality is what we would choose under ideal conditions.
Questions about the value of equality

So 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

To a certain extent, we can mix and match. But some combinations are more plausible than others…
‘...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)
The simple leveling down objection

Bill and Ben live on an island.

Bill and Ben are exactly alike and they make exactly the same choices in their lives.

In the actual world, Bill’s life is much happier than Ben’s.

Using numbers for units of happiness...

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<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
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The simple leveling down objection

Compare another possible world in which the total quantity of happiness is unchanged, but the distribution of happiness is perfectly equal…

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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.
Compare yet another possible world in which the distribution of happiness is perfectly equal, but the total quantity of happiness is much less...

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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.
The leveling down objection

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?

An egalitarian can reject P1.

The simple leveling down objection fails.
The simple leveling down objection

An economic indifference curve

Cookies

Ice cream

An ethical indifference curve

Happiness

Equality of happiness
The sophisticated leveling down objection

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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 sophisticated leveling down objection

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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<td>Ben</td>
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<td>Bob</td>
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The sophisticated leveling down objection

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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 say that people are better off if they exist than if they don’t exist?

One possible world is better for me than another only if I am better off in the first world than in the second.

But I can be better off in one world than in another only if I exist in both (cf. I can be taller in one world than in another only if I exist in both).

So one possible world is better for me than another only if I exist in both.

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…?

The lesson…

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

‘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...
The priority/sufficiency objection

Diminishing marginal utility of a good

Happiness

Ice cream

Diminishing marginal goodness of utility

Goodness

Happiness
The priority/sufficiency objection

‘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.
The priority/sufficiency objection

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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.

For a *prioritarian*, the other possible world is better than the actual world.

For a *sufficientarian*, the other possible world is better than the actual world if the threshold is, say, 45.
The priority/sufficiency objection

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.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disease A</th>
<th>Disease B</th>
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<tr>
<td>Treatment 1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Treatment 2</td>
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Prioritarians must say that the ethical decision is to take treatment 2.

Egalitarians need not say this.