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Inequality: A Complex Notion

When is one situation *worse* than another regarding inequality? In some cases the answer to this question can be easily given. We know, for instance, that among equally deserving people a situation where some are worse off than others is worse than one where everyone is equal, in terms of inequality. We also know that among equally deserving people the inequality in a situation would be worse if the gaps between the better- and worse-off were large, than if they were small. Consider, however, a situation where many are better-off, and a few are worse-off. How would the inequality in such a situation compare with the inequality in a situation where a few are better-off and many are worse-off? How would both of these compare with a situation where the better- and worse-off groups were equal in size? It is questions such as these that I shall be addressing in this chapter. As we shall see, these are complicated questions, and ones to which several plausible but conflicting answers might be given.

2.1 Individual Complaints

My main aim is to consider our judgments about how situations compare regarding inequality. However, there is another, more particular kind of judgment it will help to consider first. This kind of judgment is about how bad the inequality in a situation is from the standpoint of particular individuals in that situation.

Such judgments can be made using the terminology of “complaints.” Thus, for any situation where some people are better off than others, we can say that the best-off have nothing to complain about while the worst-off have the most to complain about. (Here, and in what follows, I often drop the locution “regarding inequality.” Henceforth all references to complaints are to be understood as complaints regarding inequality, unless stated otherwise.)

To say that the best-off have nothing to complain about is in no way to impugn their moral sensibilities. They may be just as concerned about the inequality in their world as anyone else. Nor is it to deny that, insofar as one is concerned about inequality, one might have a complaint *about* them being as well off as they are. It is only to recognize that, because they are at least as well off as every other member of their world, *they* have nothing about which to complain. Similarly, to say that the worst-off have a complaint is not to make any claim at all as to whether they will

in fact complain (they may not). It is only to recognize that it is bad (unjust or unfair) for them to be worse off than the other members of their world through no fault of their own.¹

For any world, then, in which some are worse off than others, two questions arise. Who is it that has a complaint? And, how should we compare the seriousness of different people's complaints? To the first question there seem to be two natural but competing answers, neither of which can be easily dismissed.

According to the first answer, only those *worse off than the average* have a complaint. This answer might be defended as follows. In a world of n equally deserving people the fairest distribution would be for each person to receive one n th of the total, since among equally deserving people a fair share is an *equal* share. Those who receive less than one n th of the total would thus have a complaint, since they are receiving *less* than their fair share. Moreover, they are the only people who have a complaint, since those who receive one n th or more of the total are *already* receiving their fair share or *more* than their fair share. But in a world of n people one n th of the total welfare is the average level of welfare. Hence, all and only those below the average have a complaint.²

1. Thomas Scanlon has wondered whether the *personal* character of complaints biases our thinking toward the individualistic and, if so, whether it filters out some objections to inequality *per se*. I take it Scanlon's worry is that there may be holistic objections to inequality that cannot be adequately understood in terms of individual complaints. Scanlon may be right. If we focus exclusively on individual complaints, we may fail to note holistic objections to inequality—if there are any. But, as Scanlon would no doubt agree, this is no argument against thinking about inequality in terms of individual complaints. At most it is a reminder that any account of inequality in terms of individual complaints may be incomplete.

Also, let me add the following four comments. First, it is *extremely* natural and plausible to think about different individuals having more or less to complain about regarding inequality and, once we recognize this, it is also natural and plausible to think about a situation's inequality in terms of how its different individuals fare regarding inequality. I would deny, therefore, that the personal character of complaints *biases* our thinking toward the individualistic, and suggest instead that the naturalness of thinking about inequality in terms of complaints *reflects* the fact that so much of our thinking about inequality *is* individualistic.

Second, I would deny that only holistic objections can be objections to inequality *per se*. More specifically, I think objections to inequality that are based on individual complaints *are* objections to inequality *per se*, but they are individualistic objections rather than holistic ones. (I think Scanlon might agree. His worry was only that the individualistic approach might filter out *some* objections to inequality *per se*, such as holistic ones.)

Third, as implied already, nothing in my discussion *precludes* the possibility of thinking about inequality holistically, or in any other way that doesn't focus on individual complaints. For anything I have said so far focusing on individual complaints is *one* natural and plausible way of thinking about inequality; there may be others. Thus, thinking about inequality in terms of complaints needn't filter out, at least not in the sense of rule out, some objections to inequality *per se* (holistic or otherwise). Of course, we may ultimately decide that an individualistic account of inequality is sufficiently adequate that we can dispense entirely with thinking about inequality holistically. But this would be a vindication of the individualistic approach, not a criticism of it.

Finally, I find Scanlon's worry slightly ironic. My own view is that in the past a holistic approach to inequality has so dominated people's thinking that the possibility of understanding inequality individually has been almost completely overlooked.

2. The reader will note that the argument in the text supports a view that would compare people's actual levels with the level they would be at were the welfare in their world equally distributed. Strictly

There seems to be a connection in our thinking between our notion of luck and our notion of who has a complaint. Thus, we tend to think that someone can appropriately complain about something, *s*, only if she has been unlucky with respect to *s*. If, for instance, someone has guessed seven out of ten coin tosses correctly, then she is lucky to have done as well as she did, and we will tend to think that she has no cause for complaint. Similarly, we will tend to think that someone who guesses correctly five out of ten times will have no cause for complaint. A complaint from such a person would amount to a complaint about the fact that she has not been lucky; but while one can *hope* to be lucky, it doesn't seem that one can legitimately *complain* about not being lucky. Finally, if someone *has* been unlucky and guessed correctly only three out of ten times, then we will think that she *does* have a cause for complaint; and in general, the more unlucky she has been, the more we will think she has to complain about.

But notice, whether we regard someone as having been unlucky with respect to *s* depends upon how she fares relative to the average person with respect to *s*. In our world, for instance, we regard as unlucky someone who only guesses four out of ten coin tosses correctly. However, if our world were different, and the average number of correct guesses was three out of ten instead of five out of ten, then we would no longer regard such a person as unlucky.

This way of thinking might be summed up as follows. Whatever someone is complaining about, the lament, Why me?! will tend to ring hollow if she is at or above the average in the relevant respect, because it will seem that she has not, after all, been unlucky. It will meet with a sympathetic response, however, if she is below average in the relevant respect. It seems, then, that in a world of equally deserving people someone who has less than the average level of welfare has been treated unkindly by Fate. Because she has received less than she would have if the welfare in her world had been distributed equally, it seems she has not been treated (by Fate) as the equal of her peers but has, as it were, been treated as *less* than the equal of her peers. She will have a complaint, therefore, and one that is a complaint regarding inequality.³

speaking, the latter level corresponds to a hypothetical average level, which may, but probably would not, equal their world's *actual* average level. That is, depending on how one unpacks the relevant—and tricky—counterfactual regarding the level people would be at “were the welfare in their world equally distributed,” one might think that if everyone received an equal share the total and average levels of welfare might be either greater or less than they are in the actual world. Correspondingly, one might think someone better off than the actual average might have a complaint regarding inequality, if one thought—say, in accordance with diminishing marginal welfare of resources—they were worse off than the average person would be were everyone treated fairly and equally. By the same token, one might think someone worse off than the actual average might not have a complaint regarding inequality, if one thought—say, because of increasing returns to scale—they were better off than the average person would be were everyone treated fairly and equally. In what follows I shall ignore such complications—which depend, in part, on exactly what one thinks would be involved in treating everyone fairly and equally—and proceed as if people should be compared with the actual average. This does not affect the substance of my theoretical claims, though it would presumably make a difference for their practical application.

3. An important reminder. Readers may wish to reconsider chapter 1's remarks about natural injustice and complaints if they find this example troubling, either because of my talk about Fate, or because they think the notion of “complaint” is inappropriate in such contexts. I maintain that even if there is no entity

One case where the intuitions I have been discussing seem to be operative is in the way we think about those who accidentally discover a fortune in mineral deposits on land bought for farming or development. Given that such a person is much richer than her world's average member, most people think that such a person is *lucky* to be as rich as she is. Although she may not be the world's richest person, most would contend that she has *already* received more than her fair share of the wealth, and hence that she has *nothing* to complain about regarding her wealth. In fact, while we may not begrudge her her good fortune, most would probably contend that, regarding inequality, it is bad (unjust or unfair) for her to be as rich as she is. This is because such a person seems to have been treated (by Fate) as *more* than the equal of her peers and, regarding inequality, it would seem bad for any person to receive (even from Fate) more than equal treatment.

In the case of wealth, then, whether we regard someone as having a complaint regarding inequality may seem to depend upon how she fares relative to the average

Fate who is responsible for someone's being unlucky (as presumably there is not) and against whom that person has a complaint, it is still bad for someone to be unlucky in matters of serious importance. To see that it *is* bad for someone to be unlucky, one only needs to recognize that if there *were* a Fate or God who had intentionally brought about the "unlucky" person's misfortune, He would have been perpetrating an injustice, and the person would have a complaint against Him. This leads me to want to say that the unlucky person has been the victim of a natural, or cosmic injustice; and to indicate the "badness" of her situation by saying that she has a "complaint."

I realize that some religious people think we could never have a just complaint about God's treatment of us, that He could treat us any way He wanted without being guilty of treating us unjustly or acting wrongly. Some think this in virtue of God's status as our creator, others in virtue of God's status as omnipotent (recall God's response to Job's questioning of his apparently unjust predicament, "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?" in Job 38:4). I reject the view in question. Even if God, in virtue of His infinite wisdom and goodness never *does* act unjustly, I believe there are ways He *could* act toward us that would be unjust and wrong. I shall not pursue this point. Instead, let me remind the reader who is worried about this particular example that I offer other examples and reasons supporting the conclusion that there is a natural and plausible way of thinking according to which it is those worse off than the average who have a complaint regarding inequality.

One other point. It may seem I am assuming all levels of welfare are alterable, or at least metaphysically contingent. For example, it may seem that Mary would have no grounds for complaint about Fate making her worse off than another, if there is no way that *she* could have been better off. Perhaps one would think this if Mary suffered from a genetically based handicap, and one also thought that those genes were essential to her identity. (Cf. Derek Parfit's discussion of the Non-Identity Problem in *Reasons and Persons* [Oxford University Press, 1984].) In fact, my own view is that Mary would have a complaint regarding inequality. That is, I think the egalitarian could regard Mary's being worse off than others through no fault of her own as bad (unjust or unfair) even if, by hypothesis, Mary is as well off as *she* could be. To my mind such a situation can still be cause for appropriate concern or regret. We can still feel the force of the claim that Mary's situation is such that if we *could* do something to improve it, we should. (Neither fate, nor we, could escape the charge of acting unjustly simply by creating people, or animals, whose undeserved sufferings are essential components of their identity.)

Having noted this point let me set it aside. Though the issues it raises are interesting and important (some of which I shall address, indirectly, in chapter 9), it affects the scope of my claims, but not their content. That is, this work's arguments and results are compatible with both the view that all (undeserved) inequalities are bad, and the view that only metaphysically contingent inequalities are bad. Indeed, as indicated in chapter 1, this work's central arguments and results are compatible with numerous interpretations and variations of these positions—for example, the view that only *certain* metaphysically contingent inequalities are bad, say, those socially produced.

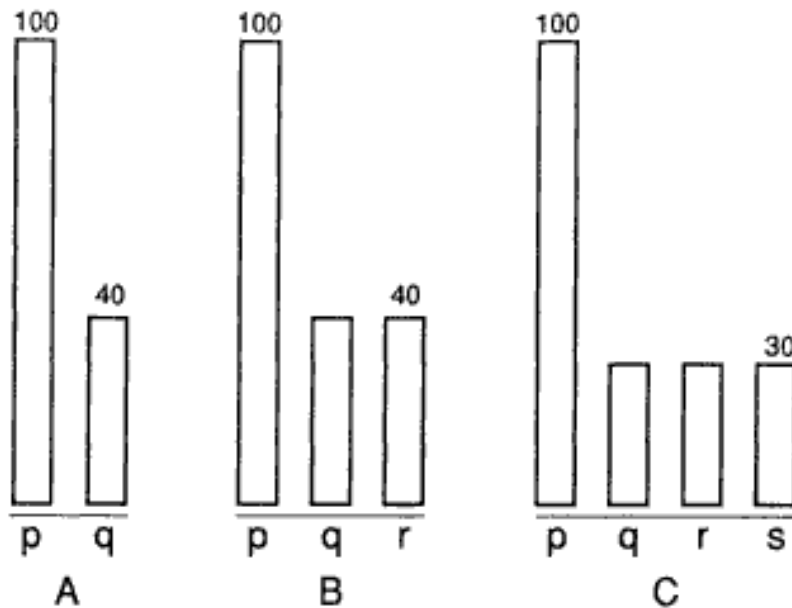


DIAGRAM 2.1

member of her world, and not on how she fares relative to the best-off member of her world. The case of welfare would seem to be analogous to the case of wealth.

Let us now turn to the second answer to the question of who has a complaint. According to this answer, *all but the very best-off* have a complaint. A defense of this answer may be made with the aid of diagram 2.1.⁴

In A, we may judge that q has a complaint because, among equally deserving people, we think it is bad (unjust or unfair) for one person to be at q's level while another is at p's. In B, for instance, it may seem that q would have just as much to complain about as in A, since she is not better off than she was in A, and since p is no worse off than she was in A. True, in B there is another who is as poorly off relative to p as q is. However, that doesn't lessen the injustice of q's being worse off than p—it only makes it the case that instead of there being one instance of injustice there are two!

Consider C. From q's perspective, C's inequality might appear worse than A's, since p is just as well off as she was in A, while q is worse off. More particularly, it appears that q's complaint would be larger in C than in A, since it is worse to be at level 30 while another is at level 100, than it is to be at level 40 while another is at level 100. Again, the presence in C of r and s may not seem to lessen the injustice of q's being worse off than p through no fault of her own; their presence only makes it the case that instead of there being one person with a larger complaint than q had

4. Throughout this book, it will often be easiest if I assign numbers to the different levels represented in my diagrams. This naturally suggests that the bottoms of these diagrams represent the zero level of welfare—the point at which life ceases to be worth living. Although presumably there *is* such a zero level, there are large disagreements about where that level is. Let me note, therefore, that nowhere in this book do my theoretical results depend upon our being able to determine the zero level precisely.

in A, there are three. But note, in C, q fares better relative to the average than she did in A. (She is 17.5 units worse off than the average rather than 30, and has 63 percent of the average rather than 57 percent.) Hence, the view that q would have a larger complaint indicates that we determine q's complaint by comparing her to p, and not to the average.

Extended, such reasoning may lead one to conclude that all but the very best-off have a complaint. Applied to the sort of example considered earlier, this reasoning suggests that even if we admit that *relatively speaking* the second best-off person has "nothing" to complain about, when we focus on the individual comparison between the best-off person and that person it will appear to be unfair or unjust for the one to be worse off than the other through no fault of her own. So, even the second best-off person will have a complaint, though her complaint may be small, both in absolute terms, and relative to the complaints of others.

Because the intuitions opposing this position are powerful, let me further illustrate the intuition that all but the very best-off have a complaint. Most regard the Millian claim that it is better to be a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied pig as an instance of the more general and equally true claim that it is better to be a dissatisfied human than a contented animal. The dissatisfaction would have to be pretty abject indeed, before most people would prefer to become a contented pig, or mouse, or frog. Yet we *don't* believe that the blind, crippled, or poor have nothing to complain about regarding inequality. This is because we compare them not to *all* the beings in the world, but to beings better off than they.⁵

This way of thinking has a long history. For instance, in medieval times people worried about the following question: Why doesn't man have a right to complain about his imperfections; about the fact that God created him *flawed* as a *man*, rather than pure as an angel or more like God Himself? Although the theologians and philosophers who regarded this as a serious question agreed that man was better off

5. One might contend that we are concerned with inequalities within our species but not inequalities between species because we feel responsible for the former but not the latter. For instance, it might be claimed that it is simply not our fault that pigs are brutes, whereas it is our fault that blacks fare worse than whites. Though true, this claim fails to explain the point in question. In my examples, I have assumed that the better-off are not responsible for the lot of the worse-off, yet I believe that egalitarians would be offended by the inequality in such worlds. Although we are no more responsible for the fact that someone was born deaf, dumb, or blind, than for the fact that pigs are brutes, it still strikes us as bad that such a person should be worse off than others through no fault of her own.

It might be claimed that cross-species comparisons are unintelligible, so that no sense can be made of the claim that human beings are "better off" than pigs or mice. Whether or not this is the case, most people *think* humans are better off than the other animals, and thinking this does not lead them to the conclusion that the worst-off members of our species have nothing about which to complain.

Similarly, although there are sophisticated philosophical reasons to believe that a pig, unlike a deaf or blind person, couldn't have ever led the life of a healthy human, I don't believe that these reasons—which concern deep issues in the metaphysics of personal identity and natural kinds—govern our commonsense intuitions on these matters. To the contrary, our cultural tradition is rich with myths, fairy tales, and other folklore that readily allow for the possibility of humans turning into animals and vice versa without loss of personal identity.

It appears, therefore, that the commonsense view that the blind, crippled, and poor have a complaint regarding inequality—despite their being better off than most animals—does implicitly involve the notion that all but the best-off have a complaint.

than other animals, they still wondered why it should not be regarded as unfair that man, through no fault of his own, should be saddled with imperfections, while others, such as the angels, were better off. This reveals the intuition that all but the very best-off have something about which to complain.

This intuition may also be involved in the way many think about America's poor. Considering the gross differences existing in America, most contend that the average poor person in America has something to complain about regarding inequality. Most would admit, however, that the average poor person in America is better off than most of the people alive today (the masses of India, China, Pakistan, and so on). This latter fact does not make us think that the average poor person in America has nothing about which to complain. Instead, it forces us to acknowledge that there are people with even more to complain about than she; and that there are even greater inequalities in the world than those existing in the United States alone. This seems to be another case where we think that all but the very best-off have something about which to complain. (Note. An alternative explanation of this last example is possible. It might be contended that America's inequality is a matter of social injustice, and that where social justice is concerned one's complaints are naturally about, and directed toward, one's own society. It might seem, therefore, that America's poor have a complaint because, relative to the other members of *their society*, they are badly off. This explanation would not apply to the other examples. This is because where natural, or cosmic, injustice is concerned it is as if one is addressing one's complaint to God, and the relevant community for comparison when complaining to God is the whole of His creation.)

On the question of *who* has a complaint, then, there appear to be two plausible answers: those below the average and all but the very best-off. Let us next consider the question of how we assess the seriousness, or size, of someone's complaint.

To this question there seem to be *three* plausible answers. The first two parallel the division in our thinking about who has a complaint. Thus we might think that the size of someone's complaint will depend upon how she compares with either *the average member of her world*, or *the best-off member of her world*. These two ways of regarding the size of someone's complaint correspond to two natural ways of viewing an unequal world: as a deviation from the situation that would have obtained if the welfare had been distributed equally, and as a deviation from the situation in which each person is as well off as the best-off person. On both views it would be natural to determine the size of someone's complaint by comparing her level to the level at which she would cease to have a complaint. On the first view, this would be the average level of her world—the level she would be at if Fate had treated each person equally. On the second view, it would be the level of the best-off person—the level at which she would no longer be worse off than another.

There is a third way of measuring the size of someone's complaint. This way accepts the view that all but the very best-off have a complaint, but contends that the size of someone's complaint depends not on how she fares relative to the best-off person but on how she fares relative to *all of the others who are better off than she*.

This view might be defended as follows. It is bad for someone to be worse off than another through no fault of her own. This is why any person who is

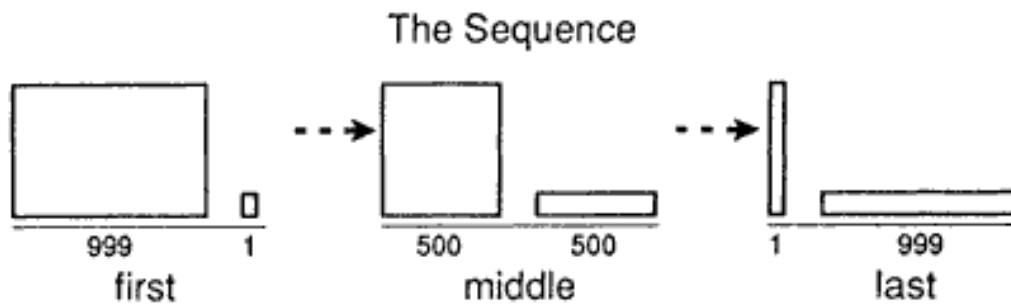
in such a position will have a complaint. But if it is bad to be worse off than one person through no fault of your own, it should be even worse to be worse off than two people through no fault of your own. And, in general, the more people there are who are better off than someone (and the larger the gap between them), the more that person should have to complain about regarding inequality. Therefore, to determine the size of someone's complaint one must compare her level to those of *all* who are better off than she, and not only to the level of the very best-off person.

Although this third way of regarding the size of someone's complaint may seem less natural than the first two, it does not seem less plausible. Indeed, it is arguable that this position captures certain of the most plausible features of the first two views, while avoiding their most implausible features.⁶

Let us summarize the argument so far. Our notion of inequality allows us to focus on particular individuals and make judgments about whether, and the extent to which, they have a complaint regarding inequality. There is, however, a division in our thinking concerning who has a complaint and how we determine the magnitude of a complaint. Specifically, one might plausibly maintain that only those below the average have a complaint and the size of their complaint depends upon (1) how they fare relative to the average—henceforth, I shall call this the *relative to the average view* of complaints. Alternatively, one may claim that all but the best-off have a complaint and the size of their complaint depends either upon (2) how they fare relative to the best-off person—henceforth the *relative to the best-off person view* of complaints—or upon (3) how they fare relative to all those better off than they—henceforth, the *relative to all those better off view* of complaints.

A further question arises as to how we actually measure the size of someone's complaint on any of the three views just stated. In this chapter, I assume that someone's complaint can be measured by subtracting her level of welfare from the level of the best-off person, or the level of the average person, or the levels of all those better off than she, depending upon the view of complaints in question. So, for example, if she is at level 100, and the best-off person is at level 175, she will have a complaint of 75 on the relative to the best-off person view of complaints. In fact this way of measuring complaints is too simple because, as we shall see in chapter 6, the figures arrived at in this way need supplementing to reflect the fact that inequality matters more at low levels than at high levels (so, someone 100 units worse off than the best-off person would have more to complain about if she were at level 200 than if she were at level 2,000). Still, for the purposes of this chapter it will be easier

6. Shelly Kagan suggests there may be four ways of regarding the size of individual complaints rather than three. He writes (in correspondence) "if the thought that 'there are others better off than me' gets divided into two variants depending on whether the complaint is increased by multiple offenders: i.e. I have a complaint relative to the best-off versus I have a complaint relative to all better off than me—then why not something similar for the 'relative to the average' view? Maybe my complaint is increased as more and more people are above the average (it is one thing if only one lucky stiff is up there: that is a fluke; it is worse if every joker but me is above average)." I confess, I do not find the fourth view suggested by Kagan as appealing as the three argued for in the text. Still, some variation of it may be plausible. If so, then the notion of inequality is even more complex than I claim.



to make the simplifying assumption that complaints can be measured in the manner suggested. This assumption does not affect my main conclusions.

2.2 The Sequence

We are now in a position to consider our general judgments about how situations compare regarding inequality. In order to explore the reasoning underlying and influencing such judgments I shall be looking at a group of artificially simple worlds, which I shall refer to as the *Sequence*. This consists of 999 outcomes, or *worlds*, each containing two groups of people, the better-off and the worse-off. The level of the better-off group is the same in each world with each member of that group being equally well off. Similarly for the worse-off groups. In addition, in each world the total size of the population is 1,000, but the ratio between the two groups steadily changes. In the first world there are 999 people better-off and 1 person worse-off, in the second 998 better-off and 2 worse-off, and so on. By the last world 1 person is better-off and 999 are worse-off.⁷ The first, middle, and last worlds of the Sequence are represented in diagram 2.2.

For each world of the Sequence, I shall retain the assumptions that the members of that world are equally skilled, hardworking, morally worthy, and so forth, and that the better-off are not responsible for the plight of the worse-off. Although these assumptions help keep our judgments about the Sequence free from the disturbing influence of certain nonegalitarian ideals, there *are* still morally significant differences between the worlds of the Sequence other than differences in their patterns of inequality. Consider, for example, the first world of the Sequence, where there are 999 people in the better-off group, and the last world, where there are 999 people

7. I first had the idea to compare the worlds of the Sequence from an unpublished article of Derek Parfit's on overpopulation ("Overpopulation," 1976). In his article, Parfit suggested that given a world whose pattern of distribution resembled an early member of the Sequence, there would be another world whose pattern resembled a later member of the Sequence that was equivalent to it regarding inequality. I found this suggestion—which struck me as both plausible and implausible—to be extremely interesting, and began to consider how the worlds of the Sequence compare regarding inequality. This led, initially, to the writing of an early version of the following discussion and, ultimately, to the writing of this book.

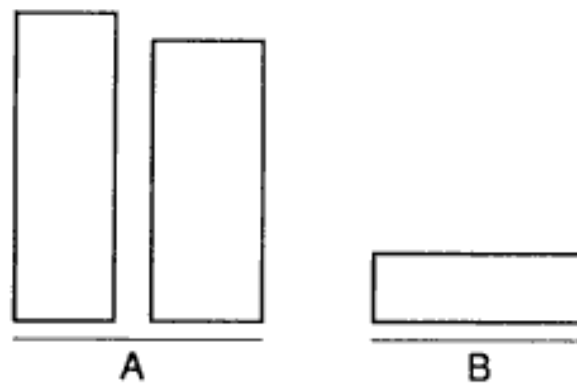


DIAGRAM 2.3

in the worse-off group. The first world is better than the last in terms of both total and average utility. Given this difference, it might be claimed that “all things considered” the first world is better than the last. This may be so. But in this book I am *not* interested in how the worlds of the Sequence compare “all things considered.” I am only interested in how they compare *regarding inequality*. This distinction can be made by looking at diagram 2.3.

We may think that “all things considered” A is better than B, since everybody in A is better off than everybody in B, and since A’s inequality may strike us as relatively slight. Nevertheless, regarding inequality, B is obviously better than A, since B represents a perfectly equal situation whereas A does not.⁸

I emphasize this point because the Sequence’s worlds are getting progressively worse in terms of both total and average utility. This is an unavoidable feature of the Sequence, but one that should not mislead us as long as we are careful to bear in mind the question in which we are interested. Fortunately, most people, or at least most philosophers, are already used to distinguishing between utilitarian and egalitarian considerations. This lessens the chance of our being seriously misled by the Sequence’s variation in utility.

Despite the foregoing, many readers are surprised that I ask them to compare situations that differ so regarding utility. Some, especially economists, think the Sequence confuses matters in avoidable—and objectionable—ways. Strictly speaking, they are right. But unfortunately there is *no* way of drawing my diagrams which is not confusing in *some* respects, and ultimately I think the Sequence is the least objectionable way of addressing my concerns. I shall not try to defend this position, but let me note the following.

I want to consider how, if at all, changing the number, or ratio, of better- and worse-off affects inequality. But in order to vary the sizes of the better- and worse-off groups while holding utility constant, one must either change the size of the gaps

8. Here, as elsewhere, I retain the assumption that the inequalities are undeserved. (Henceforth, I shall drop this tag.) Also, throughout this book, when I say that A is better than B regarding inequality, I mean that A’s inequality is not as bad as B’s.

between the better- and worse-off or the population's total size. The former brings egalitarian considerations into conflict with those about perfectionism or maximin. In addition, it makes it difficult, if not impossible, to tell how much our egalitarian judgments are actually being influenced by changes in the sizes of the better- and worse-off groups, rather than in the gaps between them. On the other hand, the latter raises a host of complicated issues I shall detail in chapter 7. In either case, I think one would ultimately face difficulties graver than the Sequence's.

Finally, let me conclude this section by acknowledging that there is a danger in looking at neatly divided worlds in that some of the conclusions reached may not be generalizable to the real world. However, here too, I think if we are careful we should be able to prevent that feature of the Sequence from leading us astray. (The issue of how our egalitarian judgments might change in situations more complex than the Sequence will be addressed in chapter 3.)

2.3 Orderings of the Sequence

There are five judgments about the Sequence I would like to consider: namely, that the worlds are (1) getting better and better, (2) getting worse and worse, (3) first getting worse then getting better, (4) first getting better then getting worse, and (5) all equivalent. As we shall see, though these judgments conflict, most can be plausibly supported. (Here, and in what follows, I have [often] dropped the locution *regarding inequality*. Throughout this book comparisons are regarding inequality unless stated otherwise.)

Better and Better

When one first considers the Sequence one might judge that the worlds are getting *better and better*, partly because as the Sequence progresses it appears to be less and less the case that a single person or small group is being especially victimized by the situation. In the *first* world, for instance, it is as if the entire burden of the inequality is borne by the one, lone member of the worse-off "group." Given that that person is worse off than *every other* member of her world, it may seem both that she has a very large complaint, and that the inequality is especially offensive. By contrast, the last world's inequality may seem relatively inoffensive. In *that* world each member of the worse-off group is as well off as *all* but *one* of the other members of her world. Hence, in that world it may seem as if nobody has much to complain about regarding inequality.

This view is plausible, and it expresses itself in the way we react to the actions of bullies or tyrants. Consider, for example, the case of a prison warden who, for nonsecurity reasons, likes to remind his prisoners that he is the boss. Suppose that without provocation, this warden regularly suspended the exercise and visitation privileges of each person whose last name began with a letter from A through L. Although undoubtedly we would find such behavior objectionable, I believe that in a certain sense we would find it even more objectionable if the warden selected one or two inmates and regularly prevented them from exercising or having any visitors.

Whereas in the one case it seems neither right nor fair that half the inmates should have their privileges suspended, in the other case it would seem especially unfair that one or two individuals alone have to bear the brunt of the warden's irrational behavior.

This same feeling influences our thinking about the abuses of a genuine political tyrant, although in such cases it is more likely that our egalitarian notions will be tempered by our utilitarian ones. If the head of a government decrees that a certain portion of the population is to be mistreated in a wide variety of humiliating ways, from a utilitarian standpoint we may well hope that it is a small portion of the population that is so mistreated. Nevertheless, from an egalitarian standpoint we may well find the decree most offensive if it applies to only a small segment of the population. This is because from an egalitarian standpoint it may seem particularly unfair for one small group to bear the brunt of the injustice in its world; and it may seem especially galling that the vast majority of the population should be leading normal happy lives, while one small segment of it gets "crushed beneath the heel of oppression."

One way of putting my point is as follows. I think that certain of our egalitarian intuitions are especially attuned to instances of invidious or capricious discrimination where a particular person or small group is *singled* out for discriminatory treatment. In fact, I think it is the *singling out* in this way of an individual or small group that is the paradigmatic case of where we judge a (harmful) discrimination to be grossly unjust or unfair. This is not to say, of course, that all things considered we should always prefer the mistreatment of a large portion of the population to the mistreatment of a small portion of the population. It is only to suggest that we might prefer this from the standpoint of (at least certain elements of) our notion of inequality. (Whether we would actually prefer the mistreatment of a large group to the mistreatment of a small group, all things considered, would presumably depend upon what the mistreatment consisted. All things considered, we must be glad that Hitler only ordered the mass murder of the Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals, and not of all the occupied peoples, and this is surely so even if [one element of] the notion of inequality conflicts with this judgment. It might have been better, however, if he had made all of the occupied peoples shave their heads and wear yellow armbands, instead of just humiliating and dehumanizing the Jews in that manner.)⁹

I suspect that this element of our egalitarian thinking may be one of the reasons why it has taken us so long to recognize the pervading discrimination against women in our society. Even though women were (and still are) being treated very differently than men, half of the population was being treated in the same way. Because of this, and because of the fact that our egalitarian intuitions are especially attuned to discrimination against individuals and small groups, it was easy for both

9. Unfortunately, this example is not completely pure. Part of the reason we might think it would have been better if all of the occupied people had to shave their heads and wear yellow armbands is that we might think that would have lessened the humiliation and dehumanization accompanying those practices. My position is that even if this were *not* so, it still might have been better if Hitler had made more people shave their heads and wear yellow armbands. In this case our egalitarian concerns may be sufficiently strong to outweigh the competing concerns of other ideals such as utility.

men and women to realize that women were being treated differently and yet fail to recognize that women were actually being *discriminated* against.

Having seen that certain elements of our thinking support the “better and better” ordering, let us next try to get clearer about what those elements involve.

One principle which might seem relevant here is the *maximin* principle of justice. Roughly, this principle states that a society’s political, social, and economic institutions are just if they maximize the average level of the worst-off group.¹⁰ In one form or another many philosophers have come to advocate a maximin principle of justice, and one can see why. There is strong appeal to the view that just as it would be right for a mother to devote most of her effort and resources to her neediest child, so it would be right for a society to devote most of *its* effort and resources to its neediest members. This view is captured by the maximin principle, a principle that, in essence, maintains that it would be unjust for society to benefit the “haves” if instead it could benefit the “have nots.”¹¹

Now strictly speaking a Rawlsian version of the maximin principle is not relevant to our discussion. The main reason for this is simply that it has been offered as a principle of *justice*, not as a principle of equality. Consider diagram 2.4. Assuming the people are equally deserving, an egalitarian will regard B’s inequality as worse than A’s. In chapter 9 we shall consider a position—extended humanitarianism—that would deny this. But as we shall see, though extended humanitarianism is often conflated with egalitarianism, and is a plausible position in its own right, it is not plausible as an *egalitarian* position. Surely, insofar as one cares about *inequality*, one should find B’s situation, where some are *much* worse off than others, more objectionable than A’s, where everyone is almost equally well-off.

But note, according to Rawls a society’s principles and institutions would be better, and not *unjust*, if they were altered to improve the lot of the worst-off group. This is so even if in order to effect a small improvement the lot of the best-off had to be improved immensely. In particular, according to Rawls’s maximin principle a society’s institutions would be more just if they were altered so as to transform the

10. More accurately, the maximin principle of justice focuses on the expectations of the representative member of the worst-off group. But the formulation given in the text is simpler and sufficient for our present purposes.

11. I think the view suggested in the text helps explain much of maximin’s appeal, I certainly do not claim it explains *all* of maximin’s appeal.

Tim Scanlon reminds me that there is a disanalogy between the mother example and maximin, since on maximin it is not enough that society devote *most* of its effort and resources to its neediest members; rather it must, in essence, devote *all* of its effort and resources to its neediest members—at least up to the point where the expectations of the average member of the worst-off group are maximized. Scanlon is right. But I think the disanalogy he points to may support my view about the basic appeal underlying maximin, since I think many believe maximin is too strong precisely at the point in question. That is, I think most would hold it is one thing to claim a mother should devote *most* of her effort and resources to her neediest child, something quite different, and implausible, to claim she must, in essence, devote *all* of her effort and resources to her neediest child. Similarly, I suspect most of maximin’s proponents actually accept a “weak” version as most plausible, according to which society should devote most, but not all, of its effort and resources to its neediest members.

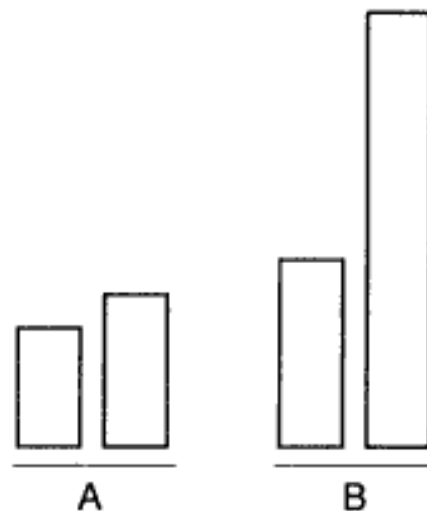


DIAGRAM 2.4

society from one like A to one like B.¹² Thus, as indicated, the maximin principle of justice is *not* a plausible principle of *equality*, for whether or not such an alteration in a society's institutions would make that society more *just*, it would certainly not make it better regarding inequality.¹³

Interestingly, many would agree with Rawls's ranking of B over A, but for very different reasons. Some might prefer B to A for perfectionist reasons, others for reasons of utility or efficiency. Those are *not* Rawls's reasons. Rawls would be willing to accept losses in perfection or utility, just as we have seen he would accept losses in equality. His concern is not with perfection, utility, or equality, but with *justice* in his sense of the term.

It should now be clear why I claimed that Rawls's maximin principle is not *itself* relevant to our discussion. Still, the *spirit* of that principle is relevant. The maximin principle of justice is a very demanding principle. It requires us to assist the "have nots" rather than the "haves" even if we could assist the "haves" more easily and efficiently than the "have nots," and even if the "haves" are only "haves" relative to the "have nots."¹⁴ It follows, therefore, that for the maximin principle to be as attractive as a survey of the literature

12. This is most evident, on Rawls's view, if we assume that B involves the pattern of inequality that, of those achievable, makes the worst-off as well off as possible.

13. It might be contended that even if the maximin principle is not a plausible principle of equality, it, or something like it, is the closest thing to an egalitarian principle that could plausibly be adopted. Put differently, it might be contended that although the maximin principle does not capture what the egalitarian *does* care about, it, or something like it, captures what the sensible egalitarian *should* care about. The kind of reasoning that might lead someone to make such a claim will be considered, and rejected, in chapter 9.

14. One might say that Rawls has given us a theory that expresses a concern for "relative poverty" or "relative deprivation of primary goods" rather than for "absolute poverty" or "absolute deprivation of primary goods." In this respect his position is more like "extended humanitarianism" (see chapter 9) than "pure" humanitarianism, which mainly focuses on relieving misery or suffering. (I trust my use of "relative deprivation" is clear here and will not be confused with W. G. Runciman's rather different usage in his important *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice* [Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966].)

reveals it to be, it must be capturing and expressing a deep and powerful element of our thought. Surely, though, what the maximin principle of justice seems to be capturing and expressing is the fact that our moral sensibilities are especially attuned to the lot of the worst-off. But if this is so, then it appears that a plausible principle of equality would be a maximin principle of equality. That is, the same basic concern for the worst-off that supports a maximin principle of justice would also seem to support a maximin principle of equality.

One way my point might be interpreted is as follows.¹⁵ Concern for the worst-off is essentially adjectival, or parasitical. It is a special concern for the situation or complaint of the worst-off regarding _____, so that any determinate concern for the worst-off rides piggyback on some other particular value about which we care and with which we fill in the blank. Thus, we can plug in the view that absolute levels of utility or welfare matter and generate a (Rawlsian) maximin principle that reflects special concern for the worst-off's welfare levels. Or we can plug in the view that inequality matters and generate a maximin principle of equality that reflects special concern for the gaps between the worst-off and others. Similarly for other values. On this view Rawls's difference principle is best understood *not* as a compromise between equality and utility, as some have suggested, but as a result of taking a concern for welfare and adjectivally modifying it with a concern for the worst-off. Also, this view supports the claim that a maximin principle of equality should be as plausible as a Rawlsian maximin principle, because each is a modification of an independently plausible value, and there is nothing about "special concern for the situation or complaint of the worst-off" that intrinsically favors piggybacking this on one value rather than another.

At this point one might object that even if a maximin principle of equality is plausible, it is not plausible as a principle of "pure" equality. That is, someone might claim that just as Rawls's difference principle does not plausibly express the position of someone whose *sole* concern is utility or welfare but instead expresses a compromise of sorts between a concern about utility and a special concern about the worst-off, so a maximin principle of equality does not plausibly express the position of someone whose *sole* concern is equality but instead expresses a compromise of sorts between a concern about equality and a special concern about the worst-off. On this view then, *insofar as one is an egalitarian*—that is, insofar as one judges outcomes *as if* equality were the *only* thing one cared about—one should not be influenced by a maximin principle, even a maximin principle of equality.

This objection has force, but it is unclear how telling it is. One might argue that insofar as a maximin principle of equality is plausible it is just that—a plausible principle *of equality*. One might claim that the distinguishing feature of egalitarianism is that it ranks outcomes not by how people fare in absolute terms, but by how people fare in relative terms. More specifically, one might argue that a principle is *egalitarian* as long as it ranks outcomes according to the size of the gaps between the better- and worse-off, but that the egalitarian may take various views regarding the manner and extent to which different gaps matter. On this view a maximin

15. Both this paragraph and the following one are paraphrased from points Shelly Kagan made in correspondence.

principle of equality will be essentially egalitarian, or at least distinctively or “sufficiently” egalitarian to warrant consideration in this work, as long as it ranks outcomes in terms of how the worst-off fare regarding *equality*—that is, in terms of how the worst-off fare relative to others—rather than in terms of how the worst-off fare regarding some other value. Finally, it is worth recalling that our initial question was not “when is there *more* inequality in one situation than another,” but “when is one situation *worse* than another *regarding inequality*.” In answering this question one can, I think, plausibly claim that a maximin principle of equality underlies and influences our egalitarian judgments.¹⁶

One version of the maximin principle of equality might be stated as follows. How bad a world is regarding inequality will depend upon how badly the worst-off group in that world fares regarding inequality; so, if the average level of complaint of the worst-off group is larger in one of two worlds, that is the world that is worse. If the level of complaint of the worst-off group is the same in both worlds, then that world will be better whose worst-off group is smallest; if the two worst-off groups are the same size, then the next worst-off groups are similarly compared, and so forth.

Notice the second clause of this principle comes into play *only* if the worst-off groups fare the same in two worlds. This is important, for depending upon which view of complaints one adopts, the magnitude of the worst-off group’s complaint may decrease as the size of the better-off group decreases or the size of the worse-off group increases. In such cases the first clause of the maximin principle would tell us the situation was improving and the second clause would not apply. Intuitively, then, the maximin principle of equality would first have us maximize the relative position of the worst-off group and then minimize the size of that group, as long as we were not thereby increasing the complaint of the remaining members of the worst-off group. It would then have us do the same thing for the next worst-off group (as long as this did not increase the complaints of those in the worst-off group), and so on, until all of the groups were as well off and as small as they could be.

We can now see one reason why the “better and better” ordering seems plausible. In accordance with certain plausible positions the members of the worst-off group have less and less to complain about as the Sequence progresses. This is true on both the “relative to all those better off” and the “relative to the average” views of complaints (since as the ratio between the better- and worse-off groups decreases, the members of the worst-off group fare better and better with respect both to the number of people who are better off than they [by a certain amount], and to the average). Therefore, insofar as we accept a maximin principle of equality there will be reason to think that the Sequence is getting better and better. And intuitively, I

16. It is not implausible for an egalitarian to hold that A’s *inequality* is *worse* than B’s because A’s worst-off have larger complaints than B’s *regarding equality*, and one might hold this even if in some sense there was *more* inequality in B than A. On the other hand one could not plausibly hold that A’s *inequality* is worse than B’s because, say, there is less *utility* in A than B. The former is plausible as an *egalitarian* judgment—that is, as a judgment about the goodness of how people fare relative to each other in that situation—in a way the latter is clearly not.

think the maximin principle of equality should be at least as plausible as a principle of equality as the maximin principle of justice is as a principle of justice.

It is worth noting that the advocate of the maximin principle of equality is concerned not with the sum total of complaints but with the *distribution* of those complaints. Specifically, she wants the inequality to be distributed in such a way that the “load” that each member of the worst-off group has to “bear” is as small as possible. Therefore, she would say, not implausibly, that regarding inequality a world where many have small complaints might be preferable to a world where a few have large complaints. (An extreme example. In one world 1,000,000 people each have a complaint of 1. In another, 1 person has a complaint of 900,000. The maximin principle would say, quite plausibly, that regarding inequality the first is vastly preferable to the second.)

Let me emphasize that in suggesting that a maximin principle would be a plausible principle of equality, I am not suggesting that such a principle would adequately capture the whole of our notion of equality. In focusing on the worst-off group and (to a large extent) ignoring the lot of the rest of society, a maximin principle of equality is too crude to serve as a complete principle of equality, just as the maximin principle of justice is too crude to serve as a complete principle of justice. Still, it must be recognized that like a maximin principle of justice, a maximin principle of equality expresses a deep and powerful element of our thinking, one that, when combined with other plausible elements,¹⁷ will support the judgment that the Sequence is getting better and better.

There is another line of thought supporting the “better and better” ordering. To illustrate it, let me temporarily drop my usual assumption that the better-off are not responsible for the plight of the worse-off through an unwillingness to share their good fortune. Specifically, let me temporarily assume that the members of the Sequence can redistribute their welfare the way money can be redistributed. On this assumption there may seem to be no excuse for the inequality in the earlier worlds. If a redistribution of welfare took place, the better-off would hardly lose anything and the worse-off would gain a tremendous amount. Hence, the inequality in those worlds may seem particularly offensive as there seems to be virtually nothing gained by it. In the middle worlds, on the other hand, a redistribution of welfare would “cost” a lot. A large number would have to sacrifice a great deal to achieve equality. In those worlds we could understand the reluctance of the better-off to redistribute, and while we might think it would be good if they were to do this voluntarily, we might not think they were morally *required* to do this. In those worlds, then, the inequality might strike us as more excusable, and hence less disturbing, than the inequality in the earlier worlds. In the end worlds, a redistribution of welfare would involve a tremendous loss in the quality of life for some, with virtually no gain in the quality of life of those thus “benefited.” Therefore, of all the Sequence’s worlds the inequality might seem

17. It is important to recognize that the maximin principle of equality does not *itself* support this ordering; it does this only when combined with the views of measuring complaints in question. As we shall see, and as the reader may have already surmised, the maximin principle will support a different ordering of the Sequence when combined with the view that the size of someone’s complaint depends upon how she fares relative to the best-off person.

least offensive in the end worlds, since in those worlds the “cost” of the inequality might seem smallest and the “gain” highest.

So, on the assumption that welfare is redistributable, the inequality may seem less and less offensive as the Sequence progresses. However, even without that assumption we might react to the Sequence in the manner suggested. If we drop that assumption we may no longer regard the inequality in the earlier worlds as inexcusable; still, the unavoidability of the inequality in those worlds may do nothing to lessen the feeling that it is so “pointless and unnecessary.” We still feel that Fate has been especially unkind to the worse-off; and we still fully recognize that a situation of complete equality would have obtained *if only* each better-off person had received a tiny bit less welfare, and *if only* “the extra table scraps” of welfare had gone to the worse-off. Therefore, with or without the assumption the earlier worlds’ inequality may strike us as especially gratuitous and, hence, as especially regrettable.

This position might be summed up as follows. Whether or not anything could be done about it, it will offend egalitarians for some to be badly off (struggling to survive) while others are well off (living lives of ease and comfort). But from one perspective, at least, we will be most offended if just a few are badly off while the vast majority are well off, since the inequality then seems particularly gratuitous. Thus, in accordance with this way of thinking, it will seem that the Sequence is getting better and better.¹⁸

18. Thomas Scanlon has questioned whether our reactions to such cases correspond to the inequality’s “gratuitousness” or to the effect of “the norm” that is at work in such cases. Let me suggest two reasons for favoring the former over the latter.

First, consider the Sequence’s first and last worlds. In both worlds “the norm” is for everybody, but one, to be perfectly equal. So how does appeal to the norm explain the intuition that the first world’s inequality is especially offensive, whereas the last world’s hardly matters? One might stress that in the first world “the norm” is for everybody, but one, to be perfectly equal *and* very well off, whereas in the last “the norm” is for everybody, but one, to be perfectly equal and *not* very well off. Moreover, in the first the unequal person is much *worse* off than the norm, whereas in the second he is much *better* off. Such statements accurately characterize the Sequence’s first and last worlds, but they don’t explain *why* it is worse if the norm is for most to be well off, with one person worse off, than if the norm is for most to be not well off, with one person better off. In other words, we need an explanation as to *why* deviations from the norm bother us in some cases but not others. Naturally, I think appeal to the inequality’s (relative) gratuitousness helps explain our reaction to such cases in a way that appeal to the norms themselves do not.

Second, appeals to “the norm” can be tricky and I am not sure how, if at all, they are supposed to be relevant to the egalitarian’s claims. Suppose, for example, an egalitarian criticized a society like the first world of the Sequence on the grounds that its inequality was so “pointless and unnecessary.” Could one undercut the egalitarian’s charge by arguing that the inequality to which he objected was “the norm” in that society, that in fact, as long as that society had ever existed (a very long time, let us assume) inequality of such a kind had obtained? I think the egalitarian might plausibly reply that it didn’t matter whether the inequality was “the norm” or not; it was nonetheless gratuitous and, hence, especially offensive.

In sum, I am suspicious of appeals to “the norm.” Even if they play *some* role in explaining our thinking, I doubt that it is the effect of “the norm” *rather than* a notion like gratuitousness that explains the reactions discussed in the text. I might add that here, as elsewhere, I am not wedded to my terminology. I find the term “gratuitousness” useful for describing certain egalitarian sentiments, but it is the sentiments that matter, not the term itself.

To summarize the discussion of this ordering. Several plausible elements support the judgment that the Sequence is getting better and better. In accordance with either the view that someone's complaint depends upon how she fares relative to all those better off than she, or the view that someone's complaint depends upon how she fares relative to the average, a maximin principle of equality would support such a judgment. In addition, such a judgment might seem plausible because the inequality seems less and less gratuitous as the Sequence progresses. There are, then, three different positions supporting the "better and better" ordering. Although these positions yield the same judgments about simple split-level cases, they represent different (combinations of) views. Correspondingly, as we shall see in chapter 3, in more complicated cases the judgments they yield may often diverge.

Worse and Worse

I would next like to suggest that certain elements of our thinking support the judgment that the Sequence is getting not better and better, but *worse and worse*. Let me begin by illustrating an example where these intuitions were, I think, at work. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, critics of the worldwide distribution pattern of wealth (henceforth "liberals") liked to point out how the United States compared with much of the rest of the world. The following comparison is the sort that was perhaps most often made: "In 1970 the national *per capita* income of the U.S. was \$4,760. In that same year, half of the world's population lived in countries with national *per capita* income of less than \$175."¹⁹

The liberal might also have tried to sway her audience with more specific country-to-country comparisons. These comparisons were almost always between the United States and a much poorer country with a very large population. Typically, the liberal would be (implicitly) asking her audience whether it really seemed equitable that the national per capita income of its country (\$4,760) should be so much higher than the national per capita income of China (\$160) with its 800,000,000 inhabitants, or of India (\$110) with its 550,000,000 inhabitants, or of Pakistan (\$100) with its 129,000,000 inhabitants.

Now it is understandable why liberals would introduce such statistics into popular debate; such statistics are both attention, and sympathy, grabbers. However, one might wonder why the liberal would choose to compare the United States to India, or China, or Pakistan, when she might have compared the United States to a much smaller, but equally poor country, such as Sri Lanka, Haiti, or Tanzania. Why was the liberal so anxious to inform her audience that half the world's population lived in countries with a national per capita income of less than \$175, when instead she could have emphasized that the 5 million people in Haiti lived in a country with a national per capita income of only \$110?

19. These figures, as well as the other national per capita income figures cited below were taken from A. B. Atkinson's book *The Economics of Inequality* (Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 238-39. Atkinson implicitly makes this comparison himself, when, after presenting a table giving the 1970 national per capita incomes of a number of countries (with the United States heading the list at \$4,760), he writes that "it should be stressed, for example, that in 1970 half of the world's population lived in countries with *per capita* income of less than \$175" (p. 239).

There are, I think, several answers to these questions. One obvious answer is that the liberal was appealing to her audience's humanitarian instincts, by drawing attention to the vast numbers of people who fare poorly. Another answer is that the liberal was appealing to her audience's utilitarian instincts, by drawing attention to a great source of disutility, and the vast potential for increasing utility by helping the needy masses. Such answers partially explain the liberal's comparisons but do not, I think, fully explain them. The liberal did not simply point out that there were masses of people faring poorly whose utility could be greatly improved. Rather she emphasized the *comparison* between the vast numbers who were poorly off and those in the United States who were best off. I suggest that *one* reason she did this is because she recognized that such comparisons could awaken the egalitarian instincts of even the most insensitive and complacent members of an audience, and convince an audience that there was a tremendous amount of *inequality* in the world. That is, implicit in the liberal's choice of comparisons is recognition of the fact that while, regarding inequality, we would undoubtedly be dismayed to learn that 5 million Haitians fare miserably compared with the average citizen of the U.S., we would be *outraged* to learn that this was the basic situation not merely for 5 million people, but for 1.5 billion people—half the population of the world!

This point may seem obvious; but given our earlier results it is not unimportant. It suggests that as long as the gap between the "haves" and the "have nots" is approximately the same, certain of our egalitarian intuitions will be particularly offended if there are *more* people worse off relative to the best-off than if there are fewer. These egalitarian intuitions would support the judgment that the Sequence is getting worse and worse.

In addition to emphasizing the extent of the inequality in the present distribution, liberals contended that worldwide inequality was worsening. It was pointed out in this regard that the rate of population growth of the underdeveloped countries was increasing exponentially, while the rate of population growth of the developed countries was slowing down. What the liberal was drawing her audience's attention to, of course, was the fact that the ratio of better- to worse-off people was decreasing. Presumably she did this at least partly because she recognized that in accordance with certain of our egalitarian intuitions we would regard the situation as becoming worse and worse as the proportion of the developed countries shrank and the proportion of the underdeveloped countries swelled.²⁰ Again, such intuitions would support the judgment that the Sequence is getting worse and worse.

Another example where such intuitions seem operative is a Marxian analysis of

20. I do not deny that the liberal may *also* have been appealing to other sentiments by stressing the exponential growth of the underdeveloped countries relative to the developed countries. She may have been implicitly appealing to humanitarian concerns on the assumption that the growing population would lower the welfare level of the have nots. For that matter, she may have been implicitly appealing to self-interested concerns on the assumption that the growing population would lower the welfare level of the haves. Here, as elsewhere, the problem with real-world examples is that they involve many different elements that are not easily distinguishable. Still, I am convinced that *one* reason the liberal stressed such a factor was because of the way it affected and heightened certain of our egalitarian intuitions. Or, more modestly, I am convinced that one effect of the liberal's stressing such factors was to heighten certain egalitarian intuitions as discussed in the text.

the advance of capitalism. Roughly, on a Marxian analysis natural inequalities between people—those owing to initial differences in environment and natural endowment—are greatly increased under capitalism as the (necessary) accumulation of capital results in wealth (and power) becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of an ever shrinking capitalist class. So, on a Marxian view, as capitalism advances more and more people who may initially fare well under capitalism are squeezed out of the ranks of the bourgeoisie into the ranks of the proletariat; hence fewer and fewer people come to reap the benefits of capitalism.

Now whatever one thinks of its ultimate accuracy, it must be admitted that as stories go a Marxian analysis of capitalism exerts a strong pull on one's egalitarian intuitions. Specifically, I think egalitarians would find the (Marxian) advance of capitalism increasingly objectionable for (at least) two reasons: first, because the rich become richer and the poor (at least relatively) poorer; and second, because the ranks of the worse-off swell and the ranks of the better-off shrink. It is the latter point that concerns us here. It suggests that certain egalitarian intuitions will be increasingly offended as more and more people are worse off relative to the better-off. These intuitions, which are particularly elicited and aroused by a Marxian story of the advance of capitalism, would support the judgment that the Sequence is getting worse and worse.

Note, as with my "liberal" example, I am not suggesting that our responses to a Marxian story can be fully understood in egalitarian terms. On a Marxian view the advance of capitalism would be objectionable for *many* reasons, concerning utility, humanitarianism, and exploitation, among others. Still, it is no accident that in many people's thinking Marxism is deeply entwined with egalitarianism, for a substantial element of a Marxian critique is that capitalism is fundamentally, and increasingly, antiegalitarian. I have emphasized one respect in which this is so; there may, of course, be others that need not concern us here.

Finally, let me briefly mention one other example. If one asks an audience to think of the worst periods of inequality in human history—as I have many times over the years—one finds one of the most common responses to be that of medieval Europe. But the common conception of medieval Europe involves a few (kings, queens, and noblemen) living in the lap of luxury while the vast majority (peasants and serfs) struggle to survive. Such a situation resembles one of the last worlds of the Sequence, rather than one of the first or middle worlds. And although here, as elsewhere, I think people's intuitive responses may be partly influenced by non-egalitarian factors as well as various different egalitarian factors, I think *one* reason so many think of medieval Europe as among the worst periods of inequality is that the number of worse-off is so large relative to the fortunate few who are well off. On reflection, then, I believe there are certain powerful egalitarian intuitions that influence people's judgment about medieval Europe and that would also support the judgment that the Sequence is getting worse and worse.

One question the foregoing discussion raises is whether the egalitarian is centrally concerned about the *absolute* numbers of worse-off, or about the *relative number* (the ratio) of worse-off to better-off. Sometimes the discussion implies one interpretation, sometimes the other, and sometimes it is (purposely) ambiguous. This is an important question, but one we can set aside for now as the relevant

positions are extensionally equivalent regarding the worlds of the Sequence. Considerations for answering this question will be assessed in chapter 6.

We have suggested that certain elements of the egalitarian's thinking would support the "worse and worse" ordering. Let us next try to determine what these elements involve. One principle that seems relevant is what I shall refer to as the *additive principle* of equality. According to this principle a world's inequality is measured by summing up each of the complaints that its individuals have, and the larger that sum is, the worse the inequality is.

An additive principle involves two natural and plausible assumptions: (1) given any two situations, the best situation with respect to some factor *f* will be the one in which the *most f* obtains if *f* is something desirable (pleasure, happiness, equality), and the one in which the *least f* obtains if *f* is something undesirable (pain, misery, inequality); and (2) to determine how much *f* obtains in a situation one needs only determine the magnitude of the individual instances of *f* obtaining and then sum them together.

Because this *kind* of principle is—understandably enough—associated with utilitarianism, let me point out that it is not its additive aspect that most people object to about utilitarianism. Most utilitarians accept three claims: the best world is that world which is best regarding utility; the best world regarding utility is that world which has the most utility; and the world with the most utility is the world in which the sum total of individual utilities is greatest. Where people usually disagree with utilitarianism is not with its additive aspect, contained in the second and third claims, but with its assumption, contained in the first claim, that utility is all that matters.

So, like the maximin principle, an additive principle of equality represents certain plausible positions. It captures the view that it is bad for one person to be in such a position that she has a complaint, and the corresponding view that it should be even worse if, in addition to the first person with her complaint, there is a second person who has a complaint. Like the maximin principle, the additive principle does not *itself* yield an ordering of the Sequence. However, when combined with the "relative to the best-off person" view of complaints, it supports the judgment that the Sequence is getting worse and worse. After all, on that view more and more people will have a complaint of a certain constant amount as the Sequence progresses, and according to the additive principle the more people there are with a given amount to complain about, the worse the situation is regarding inequality²¹

Another view supports the "worse and worse" ordering. Because the main elements of this view have already been examined, I can be brief. Earlier I noted how the maximin principle of equality could be combined with either of two plausible views about complaints to support the "better and better" ordering. However, when combined with the "relative to the best-off person" view, the maximin principle will yield the "worse and worse" ordering. This is because on this view of complaints the worst-off groups fare the same throughout the Sequence, and, according to the most plausible version of the maximin principle of equality, if the worst-off groups

21. I shall consider below the ordering that the additive principle supports when combined with either of the other two ways of measuring complaints.

fare the same in two worlds, that world will be best whose worst-off group is smallest.²² Thus, there is a second set of plausible views that combine to support the “worse and worse” ordering.

There is yet another position supporting the “worse and worse” ordering. One might arrive at this position by reasoning as follows. Despite its appeal, the maximin principle is less plausible when applied to more realistic worlds where people are spread out over a continuum of welfare levels. This is because no matter what level is chosen to separate the worst-off group from the rest of society, it seems implausible that we should be genuinely concerned with the complaints of the people at that level, but shouldn't be concerned at all (except in the case of ties) with the complaints of those who are just above that level. We may thus decide that the ever-so-slightly better-off people should be included in the worst-off group, but then the same reasoning would lead us to include the people who are ever-so-slightly better off than *they*, and so on.

What such reasoning suggests is not that there is no significant difference between those with large complaints and those with small complaints, but rather that it is implausible to contend that the complaints of the one group should matter but that the complaints of the other group should not (except in the case of ties). Thus, an additive principle might seem preferable to a maximin principle insofar as it is concerned with the complaints of *all* those who have a complaint, and not just with the complaints of some arbitrarily selected worst-off group. Yet a maximin principle might seem preferable to an additive principle insofar as it is concerned with the *distribution* rather than merely the sum total of complaints. This suggests that a principle that plausibly combined these two elements would have great appeal.

Here is one such principle: we measure a world's inequality by adding together people's complaints, after first attaching extra weight to them in such a way that the larger someone's complaint is the more weight is attached to it. Let us call this the *weighted additive* principle of equality.²³ Such a principle gives expression to both the view that we should be especially concerned with the worst-off and the view that we should be concerned with all complaints. It would thus give us a way of capturing the intuition that a world in which 40 people have complaints of 200 would be worse than a world in which 5 people have complaints of 205, and 200 people have complaints of 40. This is, I believe, a plausible intuition, but one that neither the additive principle nor the maximin principle captures.²⁴

Like the additive principle and the maximin principle, the weighted additive

22. I shall say more about why I think the most plausible version of the maximin principle has the feature in question in my discussion of the “all equivalent” ordering.

23. Note, in arriving at our weighted additive principle, the weighting function we employ to attach extra weight to large complaints may or may not itself be additive. It might, for example, be multiplicative, logarithmic, or something much more complicated.

24. Let me emphasize that although an example of this sort illustrates the plausibility of the kind of position in question, it does *not* establish the *implausibility* of the other positions. Just as it is easy to construct examples where this kind of position will seem most plausible, it is also easy to construct examples where the other positions will seem most plausible. This will become clearer in chapters 3 and 5.

principle appears to be a plausible principle of equality. Combined with the “relative to the best-off person” view of complaints, such a principle supports the “worse and worse” ordering. This is because no matter how the individual complaints are weighted, since the complaints are nonnegative, $n + 1$ weighted complaints will always be larger than n weighted complaints.

To sum up the discussion of this ordering. The additive principle, the maximin principle, and the weighted additive principle each combine with the “relative to the best-off person” view of complaints to yield the “worse and worse” ordering. As with the positions discussed in connection with the last ordering, it is important to bear in mind that although these different positions yield the same judgment about the Sequence, the judgments they yield will often, in more realistic cases, disagree.

First Worse, Then Better

We have seen that certain plausible positions support the “better and better” ordering, and that others support the “worse and worse” ordering. Still others support the judgment that the Sequence *first gets worse, then gets better*.

It is easy to be drawn to such an ordering by reasoning as follows. In the first world of the Sequence everyone is perfectly equal except, regrettably, for one, single, isolated individual. In that world, then, the worse-off “group” represents an ever-so-slight perturbation in an otherwise perfectly homogeneous system. Therefore, because in the first world there is just a slight deviation from absolute equality, that world may seem nearly perfect regarding inequality. In the second world there are two people who are not at the level of everyone else. The deviation from a state of absolute equality has become more pronounced; hence that world may seem worse than the first. As the Sequence progresses this pattern continues for a while. The deviations from absolute equality become larger, and as they do the Sequence appears to be getting worse and worse. After the midpoint, however, the deviations from absolute equality begin to get smaller, as the better-off group comes to represent a perturbation in the system. By the end world there is once again just an ever-so-slight deviation from absolute equality. Everyone is perfectly equal except, regrettably, for one, single, isolated individual. Like the first world, therefore, that world may appear almost perfect regarding inequality. In sum, because it seems almost tautological that the less a situation deviates from absolute equality the better it is regarding inequality, it seems natural and plausible to judge that the Sequence first gets worse, then gets better.

Implicit in such reasoning is an intuitive notion as to how the deviation from a state of absolute equality should be measured. Let me give some content to this intuitive notion. Suppose that the best-off person in the last world (I) of the Sequence has 100 units of welfare, and that each of the worse-off people have 80 units. We would then say that I deviates from a state of perfect equality by a mere 20 units of welfare, since if the best-off person had 20 less units I would be a perfectly equal world. Now I also deviates from (infinitely) many other perfectly equal situations. For instance, I deviates from the situation where

everybody is at level 100 by 19,980 units of welfare. This, however, does *not* (and should not) lead us to conclude that there is really a large deviation from absolute equality in 1.

The point here is that, in determining how much a given world deviates from absolute equality, it seems reasonable to compare that world with the closest possible world that is perfectly equal (where r will be closer to s than to t , if the total number of units that have to be added to and/or subtracted from the various members of r to transform r into s is less than the total number of units that would be involved in transforming r into t). Now it can easily be shown that for any world w , the closest possible world to w that is perfectly equal will be that world where everybody is at w 's median level.²⁵ Thus, on the reasoning under discussion inequality could be measured by determining the amount of deviation from the median.

Applied to the Sequence, it is easy to determine that this reasoning would yield an ordering corresponding to a symmetrical hump. Each of the various "reciprocal" worlds—that is, the first and last, and more generally n th and n th last worlds—are equivalent, with the first and last worlds being the best and the middle world the worst. Naturally, in realistic cases a society's median level (roughly, the level of the person below and above which there are the same number of people) will almost never be the same as the level of either the best-off person or the average person, hence the amount of deviation from the median will *not* generally be the same as the amount of deviation from either the best-off person or the average person.

Another line of thought supports the "worse, then better" ordering. In the first world of the Sequence only *one* person has a complaint, so as large as that complaint may be that world's inequality may not seem too bad. Specifically, it may not seem as bad as the second world's inequality, where it may seem that *two* people have almost as much to complain about as the one person had in the first world. And these two worlds' inequality may not seem *nearly* as bad as the middle world's inequality. In the middle world, it may seem *both* that a large number have a complaint (half of the population), *and* that the magnitude of their complaints will be large (they are, after all, worse off than half the population through no fault of their own). In the last world, on the other hand, the situation may seem analogous to, though the reverse of, the one obtaining in the first. Although almost everyone has *something* to complain about, it may seem that the size of their complaints will be virtually negligible. Hence, as with the first world, the inequality may not seem too bad.

Such reasoning involves two by now familiar elements: the view that the size of

25. Basically the median level of welfare is that level where there are the same number of people at or above it, as at or below it. If there are an odd number of people in a society, then the median level will simply be the level of the middle person. If there are an even number of people, then the median level will be the arithmetic average of the two "middle" people; so if there are 100 people and the level of welfare of the 50th person is 500 and the level of the 51st person is 600 then the median level will be 550. (Actually, it is easy to show that when the population of world w is even, there may be many perfectly equal worlds that are equally close to w . Specifically, any world where everyone is at one of the levels ranging from the one "middle" person to the other "middle" person would be equally close to w . So, in the example given, any world where everyone is at the same level ranging from 500 to 600 would be equally close to the world in question.)

someone's complaint depends upon how she fares relative to all those better off than she, and the additive principle of equality. According to the "relative to all those better off" view of complaints the size of individual complaints will decrease as the Sequence progresses, as there will be fewer and fewer better off than those who have a complaint. According to the additive principle, how bad a world is will depend upon both the magnitude *and* the number of complaints. Combined, these views support the judgment that, regarding inequality, the middle worlds, where a fairly large number have fairly large complaints, will be worse than either the initial worlds, where just a few have very large complaints, or the end worlds, where many have very small complaints. Indeed, on the view assumed here, according to which the size of someone's complaint is measured by summing up the difference between her level and that of each person better off than she, it is a simple task to verify that the combination of views I have been discussing will support the judgment that the Sequence first gets worse, then better.

Similar reasoning would lead one to expect that the additive principle would also support the "worse, then better" ordering when combined with the "relative to the average" view of complaints. As the Sequence progresses the situation changes from there being a few much worse off than the average to there being many only a little worse off than the average. So, by combining the two views in question, it might seem that the middle worlds, where a fairly large number have fairly large complaints, will be worse than either the initial worlds, where just a few have very large complaints, or the end worlds, where many have very small complaints. And it is easy to verify that the "worse, then better" ordering is yielded by these views, if one makes the assumption that how bad it is for someone to deviate from the average can be measured by taking the difference between her level of welfare and that of the average person.

The foregoing is slightly oversimplified. On the "relative to the average" view of complaints it might seem that deviations *above* the average should be regarded as bad as well as deviations *below* the average. This is because, as noted earlier, on the intuitions underlying the relative to the average view of complaints anyone receiving more than the average will appear to be receiving *more* than her fair share. Such a person will seem to have been treated (by Fate) as *more* than the equal of her peers and, regarding inequality, just as it would seem bad for any person to receive (even from Fate) *less* than equal treatment, so it would seem bad for any person to receive *more* than equal treatment.

Using the terminology of *complaints*, it might be said that although those above the average do not have a complaint, *we* have a complaint about them being as well off as they are. Correspondingly, on the additive principle we would measure inequality by adding up all of the complaints of those below the average and all of our complaints about those above the average. In essence, then, because on the relative to the average view of complaints deviation from the average in either direction is bad, on the additive principle the worse of two worlds would be that one in which the total deviation from the average was greatest. Although this complicates the overall view, it would not change the ordering, or the basic reasoning underlying it. After all, in the first world only 1 person deviates below the average by a very large amount while the other 999 barely deviate above the average. Thus

the inequality in that world may not strike us as nearly as bad as the inequality in the middle world, where half the population is much *worse* off than the average and half is much *better* off than the average. The last world is analogous to the first, as 1 person deviates above the average by a very large amount, while the other 999 barely deviate below the average. Hence the inequality in that world, like the inequality in the first, may not seem particularly bad.

The preceding raises a general worry about my book's presentation and focus. I have suggested that we can measure inequality (primarily) as a function of those who have complaints regarding inequality. But, it might be urged, equality is a symmetrical relation. If we think it is bad for A to be worse off than B, then we should think it is equally bad for B to be better off than A. Correspondingly, if A has a complaint vis-à-vis B, then following the suggestion given above one might claim that even if B has no complaint vis-à-vis A, we have a complaint *about* B's position vis-à-vis A. Such reasoning suggests that on the intuitions underlying the "relative to the best-off person" view we should count both the complaints of the worse-off relative to the best-off, and *our* complaints about how the best-off fares relative to the worse-off. Similarly, on the intuitions underlying the "relative to all those better off" view, we should count both the complaints of the worse-off relative to all those better off, and *our* complaints about how the better-off fare relative to each person worse off.

The above view has some plausibility, but I am not sure it dictates a revision in my claims or approach. Let me grant that equality is symmetrical in the manner in question, that the egalitarian who objects to A's being worse off than B equally objects to B's being better off than A. Even so, these seem to be just two alternative ways of describing the same thing: namely, the egalitarian's basic objection to the inequality between A and B. If, for example, we have already measured the egalitarian's objection to the inequality between A and B in terms of A's complaint regarding B, it is not clear that we must *also* measure the egalitarian's objection to the inequality between A and B in terms of our complaint about B's position regarding A. Such a move may simply involve double counting and may, in any event, be unnecessarily complicated and otiose. Thus, although I think there is reason to invoke the conception of *our* complaints about those better off than the average given the basic intuitions underlying the relative to the average view of complaints, and while doing this will often affect the orderings generated by that view,²⁶ it is not clear that we should invoke the conception of our complaints about the position of the best-off relative to those worse off, or about the positions of the better-off relative to all those worse off, given the basic intuitions underlying the relative to the best-off person and the relative to all those better off views of complaints (and given that we are already measuring individual complaints of the worse-off in accordance with those views). Moreover, it is even less clear that adding *our* complaints about the relative positions of the best- or better-off to the worse-off's complaints would affect the orderings generated by

26. Although it doesn't happen to do this in the case of the Sequence discussed previously, it will in many other cases.

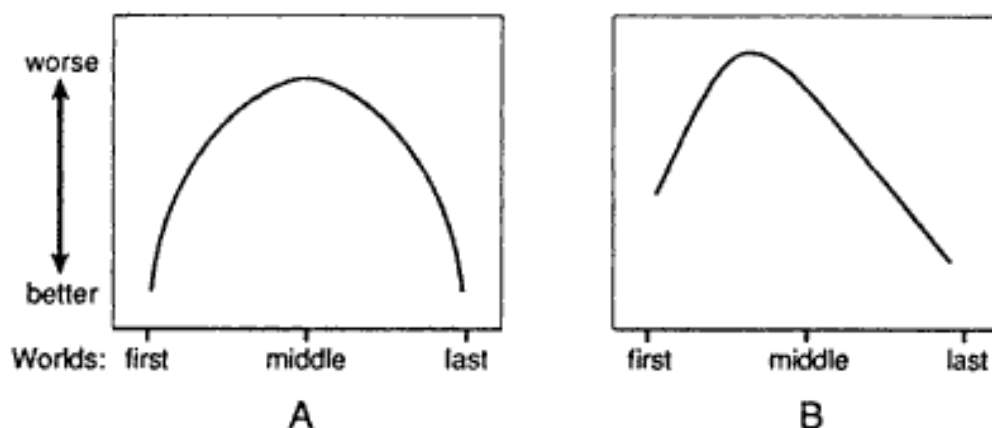


DIAGRAM 2.5

the views in question and, hence, that there would be any point in doing so. In sum, I tentatively conclude that for most of inequality's aspects focusing on individual complaints is sufficient, and that we only need to consider *our* complaints about the better-off on the relative to the average view. Naturally, if I am mistaken about this my arguments and results must be revised accordingly, perhaps reflecting even further inequality's complexity.

Returning to the main argument, we saw above that the additive principle would support the "worse, then better" ordering when combined with either the "relative to all those better off" or the "relative to the average" view of complaints. In addition, the *weighted* additive principle, in any plausible version, would support the "worse, then better" ordering when combined with either of those views of complaints. But whereas the additive principle would combine with the "relative to all those better off" and the "relative to the average" views of complaints to yield an ordering of the Sequence corresponding to a *symmetrical curve* (like A of diagram 2.5), the weighted additive principle would combine with those views to yield a *skewed curve* (like B of diagram 2.5). That is, on the weighted additive principle the Sequence would first get worse and then get better, but the various "reciprocal" worlds would not be equivalent (for $n < 500$ the n th world would be worse than the n th last world), and the worst world would not be the middle world but an earlier world. The extent to which the curve would be skewed would depend on the exact weighting system employed by the weighted additive principle. If larger complaints receive lots of extra weight, it will be greatly skewed; if they only receive a little extra weight, it will only be slightly skewed.²⁷

To sum up the discussion of this ordering. Several different positions support the judgment that the Sequence first gets worse, then gets better. The view that a world's inequality can be determined by considering how much that world deviates

27. If the weighting scheme were extreme enough, the weighted additive principle would support the "better and better" ordering when combined with the two views of complaints in question. However, such a weighting scheme would implausibly imply that to be worse off than 999 people is not merely *somewhat* worse than being worse off than 998, it is at least twice as bad. Given any plausible system of weighting, the "worse, then better" ordering results.

from a state of absolute equality would support such an ordering; so would both the additive principle and the weighted additive principle when combined with either the “relative to all those better off” or the “relative to the average” view of complaints. As usual, because each of these positions represents different (combinations of) elements of our thinking, the judgments they yield about more realistic situations will often disagree.

First Better, Then Worse

By now it may seem that there are *bound* to be several plausible positions supporting the judgment that the Sequence *first gets better, then gets worse*. However, if there *are* such elements, I am not aware of them. (One position that may initially seem to support such an ordering is considered, and rejected, in appendix A.)

All Equivalent

Do any plausible views support the judgment that the Sequence’s worlds are *all equivalent*? One principle that would support this ordering when combined with the “relative to the best-off person” view of complaints would be a maximin principle of equality that lacked the tie-breaking clause that if the worst-off groups in two worlds fare the same, then that world will be best whose worst-off group is smallest.

I believe that the version of the maximin principle with the tie-breaking clause is more plausible than the version without it. However, it might be charged that it is the latter version that actually captures our *maximin* views, and that the former version just represents an *ad hoc* attempt to reconcile our maximin views with certain other views. I think this charge cannot be sustained, and shall briefly suggest why.

The claim that we are especially concerned about the worst-off group is misleading, insofar as it suggests a concern on our part about the *group itself* as opposed to the *members* of that group. We do not have a special concern for some real or abstract entity, “the worst-off group.” What we have is a special concern for the worst-off members of our world, and it is *this* concern that the maximin principle expresses.²⁸ But surely, insofar as we are especially concerned with the worst-off members of our world, we would want to raise as many of them as possible above their present level, as long as by doing that we were not increasing the others’ complaints. This suggests that of the two competing versions it is indeed the one first considered that accurately expresses our maximin views. Thus one must look elsewhere to support the judgment that the Sequence’s worlds are all equivalent.

One line of reasoning supporting this ordering can be illustrated with the following example. Suppose there were three Greek city-states, A, B, and C. Suppose that

28. This claim is significant. Also controversial. It reflects the *individualistic position* that individuals, rather than groups or societies, are the proper objects of moral concern. The individualistic position opposes the *holistic one*, which maintains that groups or societies may also be the proper objects of moral concern. The implications and relative merits of these positions will receive further attention in many of the following chapters.

in A any foreigner could be enslaved and treated in any manner whatsoever, whereas in both B and C only adult male foreigners could be enslaved and only if they were properly clothed, sheltered, and fed. Now, even without knowing how many people were enslaved in each of these societies, there are two senses in which one could plausibly claim that B was better than A and equivalent to C with respect to slavery. One might mean by such a claim that the kind of slavery in B—how well the slaves fare—is the same as the kind of slavery in C, and better than the kind of slavery in A. One might also mean by such a claim that the principles and institutions responsible for the systems of slavery in the societies are equally unjust in B and C, and even more unjust in A. In this second sense, our judgment about how bad the societies are with respect to slavery would not depend upon the number of people affected by the principles and institutions in question; for our judgments would be, as it were, judgments about the “character” of those societies. Thus, just as we would not regard one judge who solicited and accepted bribes in each of her cases as less corrupt than another who did the same, merely because she tried fewer cases, so we would not regard society B as less unjust than society C, merely because (being located in a less densely populated area) its members had captured fewer slaves.

These considerations suggest two ways in which the worlds of the Sequence might plausibly be regarded as equivalent. First, because on the “relative to the best-off person” view of complaints the members of the worse-off groups fare the same throughout the Sequence, it may seem that the *kind* of inequality is the same throughout the Sequence and, hence, that in that sense each of the worlds is equivalent. Second, if one adopts the “relative to the best-off person” view of complaints, and if one thinks of the worlds of the Sequence as representing societies whose principles and institutions are responsible for the *kind* of inequality in those worlds but not the number of people who are in the better- and worse-off groups, then one might regard each of those worlds as equivalent, in the sense that insofar as the inequality in those worlds is concerned each of those societies—that is, the principles and institutions governing them—would be equally unjust. (Note, as used here, to say two societies are more or less unjust is not equivalent to saying that they are more or less objectionable because of the extent to which they are unequal; rather it is to say that they are more or less objectionable because of the way in which their principles and institutions promote or prevent inequality.)

Now the first sense in which the worlds might be regarded as equivalent merely illustrates what we have known all along—that the gap between the better- and worse-off groups is constant throughout the Sequence. Knowing that the worlds of the Sequence are all equivalent in *this* sense would give us no reason to regard them as equally desirable from a moral perspective in the absence of an argument that how good a society is regarding inequality depends solely on the size of the gaps between the better- and worse-off groups. However, the second sense in which the worlds might be regarded as equivalent is, I believe, a substantive one. It expresses the view that there is a sense in which two societies can be equally unjust, though things may be worse in one than the other.²⁹ I believe, therefore, that it *can* be

29. It is, I think, one of the great, but too often overlooked, strengths of Rawls’s theory of justice that it accommodates this view, along with the analogous view that one society might be less just than another

plausibly claimed that the Sequence's worlds are equivalent regarding inequality. However, this is more plausible where *social* justice is concerned than where natural or cosmic justice is concerned.

Consider again slaveholding societies B and C, and suppose they are equally populous. If 10 percent of B's population are slaves, and 60 percent of C's population are slaves, then even though B and C may be equally unjust as far as *social* justice is concerned, C will seem worse than B as far as *natural* justice is concerned, since the slaves in B and C are the victims of the same kind of injustice, and since there are *more* victims of injustice in C than in B. The case of inequality is more complicated than that of slavery, since we may think that the kind of inequality changes as the ratios between the better- and worse-off groups shift; still, as far as natural justice is concerned, it seems that a change in the ratios between the better- and worse-off groups should have some effect on a situation's inequality.

There may be a different kind of position supporting this ordering. One may think that the Sequence's worlds are all equivalent, not in the sense that they are *exactly* as good as each other, but in the sense that one cannot choose between them. On this view a change in the ratios between the better- and worse-off groups may affect a world's inequality, but not in a way that permits one to say whether the world has gotten better or worse. One might be driven to such a position as either a compromise between, or a skeptical result of, the numerous conflicting views already discussed. Looking at the Sequence we find that different intuitions lead us to judge that it is getting better and better, worse and worse, and first worse and then better. This may lead us to conclude that we cannot compare the Sequence's worlds regarding inequality, that our notion of inequality is complex and incomplete, a notion that allows us to make *some* inequality judgments but not others.

The idea here might be put as follows. When we consider our notion of inequality it may seem that there are various *aspects* involved in that notion. In comparing two worlds these aspects may, as they do with respect to the Sequence, conflict. When this happens it may seem that we cannot judge which of the worlds is better regarding inequality. Perhaps the best we can do is point out that in terms of *certain* aspects of inequality the one world is better, whereas in terms of *other* aspects the other is.

It is an important question whether or not such reasoning ultimately supports the judgment that the worlds of the Sequence are equivalent—at least in the sense that one cannot choose between them. However, I do not wish to pursue this question now.³⁰ In this chapter I am not trying to determine what the most plausible compromise between some or all of our egalitarian judgments would be (if there even *is* such a compromise to be found). I am interested in trying to determine what our egalitarian views actually are. My question, then, is whether there are any independently plausible elements of our thinking that would support the judgment that the Sequence's worlds are all equivalent regarding inequality. The only such element I

though in absolute terms its members (*including* those in the worst-off group) fare better. This tremendously important point has, I think, profound implications. (See part 3 of my "Intransitivity and the Mere Addition Paradox," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 16 [1987]: especially pp. 173–79.)

30. I shall be returning to it, albeit indirectly, in sections 3 and 4 of chapter 5.

am aware of, is the one according to which the worlds would be regarded as equivalent *if* the “relative to the best-off person” view of complaints was adopted, and *if* the worlds of the Sequence represented societies whose principles and institutions were responsible for the size of the gaps between the better- and worse-off groups, but not the number of people in those groups.

2.4 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have been examining the question of how we judge one situation to be worse than another regarding inequality. I have suggested that a number of plausible positions might influence our egalitarian judgments. Specifically, I have suggested that the additive, weighted additive, and maximin principles could each be combined with the relative to the average, the relative to the best-off person, and the relative to the all those better off views of complaints, to yield a judgment about how good or bad a situation is regarding inequality. I have also suggested that in accordance with certain other plausible views, we might judge a situation’s inequality in terms of either how gratuitous it appears to be, or how much it deviates from a state of absolute equality. Finally, I have suggested that we may judge how good or bad a society is regarding inequality in terms of the principles and institutions of that society responsible for the inequality.

In all then, I claimed there were (at least) twelve different aspects or positions underlying or influencing our egalitarian judgments (there may be more). In illustrating my claims I showed how different orderings of the Sequence would be supported by different aspects. Diagram 2.6 sums up the relevant results. Note, the concern about social inequality will only rank the Sequence’s worlds equivalent given certain assumptions discussed in the text. With different assumptions the concern about social inequality might support any ordering of the Sequence.

I have not offered a final judgment about how the Sequence’s worlds compare regarding inequality. I shall return to this in chapter 10 when I discuss practical implications. For now, my concern with the Sequence has been solely to help illustrate inequality’s complexity. Also, I have not attached any special importance to the extent of agreement, or lack thereof, which the different positions have regarding the Sequence. To the contrary, as I have emphasized throughout, and shall illustrate in the following chapters, positions that agree, or disagree, regarding the Sequence may disagree, or agree, in other cases.

In suggesting that many different positions underlie and influence egalitarian judgments, I am *not* suggesting that each of these positions is equally appealing much less that everyone will find them so. But I do think that each represents certain plausible views that cannot easily be dismissed. Because these views often conflict, it may be possible, for each of the positions discussed, to construct examples where the judgment yielded by that position seems implausible. This does *not* show that the various positions are not plausible, nor does it show that they are not involved in people’s egalitarian judgments. What it shows is that each position does not *itself* underlie each such judgment.

I have focused in this chapter on what happens to our egalitarian judgments

Aspects of Inequality	Orderings of the Sequence				
	Better and Better	Worse and Worse	First Worse then Better	First Better then Worse	All Equivalent
MP & AVE :	X				
MP & BOP :		X			
MP & ATBO :	X				
AP & AVE :			X		
AP & BOP :		X			
AP & ATBO :			X		
WAP & AVE :			X		
WAP & BOP :		X			
WAP & ATBO :			X		
Deviation :			X		
Gratuitousness :	X				
Social Inequality :					X

- MP = Maximin Principle of Equality
 AP = Additive Principle of Equality
 WAP = Weighted Additive Principle of Equality
 AVE = Relative to the Average View of Complaints
 BOP = Relative to the Best-Off Person View of Complaints
 ATBO = Relative to the All Those Better Off View of Complaints

DIAGRAM 2.6

when the levels between the better- and worse-off groups remain the same, but the ratios between those groups vary. Questions still needing to be explored are: what happens to our egalitarian judgments in cases involving more than two groups; how are our egalitarian judgments affected by variations in group levels, by transfers between groups, or by variations involving nonhomogeneous groups; does inequality matter more in a poor society than in a rich one; and is inequality affected by a population's size? These questions, and others, will be addressed later. As we shall see, although these questions concern important elements of the egalitarian's thinking, their answers do not affect the main results of this chapter.³¹

One conclusion this chapter suggests that the *nonegalitarian* might readily em-

31. As we shall see in chapter 3, it may be that some of our initial judgments about which egalitarian positions seem *most* plausible will have to be revised when we consider situations more complicated than the Sequence. However, even in more complex situations, it remains true that each position discussed represents elements that cannot easily be dismissed; elements that will influence our judgments about those situations, and that will often conflict with one another.

brace can be put as follows. Upon examination, the notion of inequality turns out to involve a hodgepodge of different and often conflicting positions. Moreover, and more important, many of these positions are fundamentally incompatible, resting as they do on contrary views. It simply cannot be true, for instance, *both* that everybody but the best-off person has a complaint *and* that only those below the average have a complaint. Nor can it be true that the size of someone's complaint should be measured by comparing her to the average, *and* by comparing her to the best-off person, *and* by comparing her to all those better off than she. The notion of inequality may thus be largely inconsistent and severely limited. Although it may permit certain rather trivial judgments, such as the judgments that an equal world is better than an unequal one, and that "other things being equal" large gaps between people are worse than small ones, in many, and perhaps most, realistic cases, one cannot compare situations regarding inequality.

Understandably, the egalitarian might try to resist this conclusion. As indicated in the discussion of the last ordering, she might contend that each of the positions presented in this chapter represents a different *aspect* of inequality, and she might insist that what the conflict between these aspects illustrates is just how complex and multifaceted that notion truly is. What we need, it might be claimed, is to arrive at a measure of inequality that accurately captures each of the aspects involved in that notion, according them each their due weight. Such a measure would give us a way of accurately comparing many, though perhaps not all, situations regarding inequality.

In chapter 10 I shall return to the question of whether inequality is inconsistent, and if so what that implies about egalitarianism. But as this book's concern is with elucidating egalitarianism, not defending it, in the intervening chapters I simply assume the egalitarian can defend the position that the notion of inequality is complex, multifaceted, and partially incomplete, rather than largely inconsistent and severely limited. Either way, however, I think many of our commonsense egalitarian judgments will have to be revised.³²

32. I shall say more about the manner in which our egalitarian judgments will have to be revised in chapter 10, when I discuss some of this work's practical implications.