

# Egalitarianism Defended\*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In “Equality, Priority, and Compassion,” Roger Crisp rejects both egalitarianism and prioritarianism. Crisp contends that our concern for those who are badly off is best accounted for by appealing to “a sufficiency principle based—indirectly, via the notion of an impartial spectator—on compassion for those who are badly off” (p. 745).<sup>1</sup> A key example of Crisp’s is the Beverly Hills case (discussed below). This example is directed against prioritarianism, but it also threatens egalitarianism. In this article, I respond to the Beverly Hills case. I also challenge the wide person-affecting principle and Crisp’s welfarist restriction, which some believe underlie the Levelling Down Objection against egalitarianism.<sup>2</sup> My aim in this article is to defend egalitarianism by illuminating both its nature and appeal.

The article has six additional sections. The next section, Section II, summarizes Crisp’s positive account of when we should give priority to a worse-off person over a better-off person and presents his Beverly Hills case. Section III characterizes the version of egalitarianism with which this article is concerned. Sections IV and V show, respectively, that egalitarians might accommodate Crisp’s intuitions about the Bev-

\* Over the years, many have influenced my thinking on this article’s topics. While my poor memory prevents me from properly acknowledging them all, I’d like to thank Tyler Cowen, James Griffin, Dan Hausman, Nils Holtug, Shelly Kagan, F. M. Kamm, Thomas Nagel, Ingmar Persson, John Roemer, Amartya Sen, Seana Shiffrin, and Andrew Williams. I’d also like to thank the editors of *Ethics*. Special thanks are owed to John Broome, G. A. Cohen, Roger Crisp, Jeff McMahan, and Derek Parfit.

1. Roger Crisp, “Equality, Priority, and Compassion,” in this issue, p. 745.

2. Derek Parfit introduces the distinction between narrow and wide person-affecting principles in pt. 4 of *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984); see, esp., secs. 134–36. Parfit also introduced the name “The Levelling Down Objection” in his article “Equality or Priority” (Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas, 1991, Department of Philosophy, University of Kansas; this was reprinted in *The Ideal of Equality*, ed. Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000], pp. 81–125), though the position itself has long been a staple of anti-egalitarians.

*Ethics* 113 (July 2003): 764–782

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erly Hills case, but that they needn't do so, as there are good reasons to reject those intuitions. Section VI questions the wide person-affecting principle, Crisp's welfarist restriction, and the Levelling Down Objection. Finally, Section VII concludes.

Crisp's article forcefully challenges both egalitarianism and prioritarianism. However, in this article, I shall raise significant doubts about Crisp's rejection of egalitarianism.

## II. COMPASSION AND THE BEVERLY HILLS CASE

Crisp believes that, in some cases, we should give priority to a worse-off person over a better-off person. But he denies that the best explanation of this is provided by egalitarianism or prioritarianism. Rather, he claims, we should appeal to what an impartial spectator would say about the situation, where, he assumes, the impartial spectator will be motivated by compassion. Thus, Crisp contends that "the notion of compassion . . . used in conjunction with the notion of an impartial spectator, may provide us with the materials for an account of distribution which allows us to give priority to those who are worse off when, and only when, these worse off are themselves badly off" (p. 757). Specifically, Crisp proposes "*The Compassion Principle*: absolute priority is to be given to benefits to those below the threshold at which compassion enters. Below the threshold, benefiting people matters more the worse off those people are, the more of those people there are, and the greater the size of the benefit in question. Above the threshold, or in cases concerning only trivial benefits below the threshold, no priority is to be given" (p. 758). As for where compassion's threshold lies, Crisp explicitly echoes Harry Frankfurt in endorsing "*The Sufficiency Principle*: compassion for any being B is appropriate up to the point at which B has a level of welfare such that B can live a life which is sufficiently good" (pp. 762).<sup>3</sup>

Crisp's analysis has a simple form. He offers an explanation of when we should give priority to a worse-off person over a better-off person. Roughly, he claims that it is only appropriate to give one person priority over another when the person's situation warrants greater compassion. But, he suggests, compassion only stretches so far; above a certain level—specifically, when a person's life is "sufficiently" good—compassion is not warranted. Thus, among people whose lives are "sufficiently" good, there is no reason to give any of them priority, even if some of them are

3. In a highly influential article (Harry Frankfurt, "Equality as a Moral Ideal," *Ethics* 98 [1987]: 21–43), Frankfurt argues that economic equality itself doesn't matter; what matters is for everyone to have "enough." Frankfurt calls his view "the doctrine of sufficiency." Unfortunately, most of Frankfurt's arguments attack a straw man, as they establish what egalitarians readily grant, namely, that *economic* inequality, as such, is not what matters. Following in the spirit of Frankfurt's article, Crisp is trying to extend Frankfurt's insights about sufficiency beyond the economic realm.

worse off than others. Clearly, if Crisp is right, we should reject both egalitarianism and prioritarianism, since both views give priority to a worse-off person over a better-off person, even when the worse-off person is sufficiently well off that she doesn't warrant our compassion.<sup>4</sup>

To support his claims, Crisp offers the Beverly Hills case, where we must choose between offering "fine wine to different groups of well-off individuals" (p. 755). We can give bottles of Lafite 1982 to 10 Rich and raise them from level 80 to level 82, or we can give bottles of Latour 1982 to 10,000 Super-rich and raise them from level 90 to level 92. Crisp claims that we should raise the 10,000 Super-rich rather than the 10 Rich. He writes, "It seems somewhat absurd to think that the *Rich* should be given priority over the *Super-rich* to the extent that aggregation is entirely forbidden in the case of the latter" (p. 755). But he then adds the following, much stronger, claim: "Indeed, what the Beverly Hills case brings out is that, once recipients are at a certain level, any prioritarian concern for them disappears entirely. This implies that any version of the priority view must fail: when people reach a certain level, even if they are worse off than others, benefiting them does not, in itself, matter more" (p. 755). Crisp's contention is that neither the Rich nor the Super-rich warrant our compassion; hence, there is no reason to give the Rich priority over the Super-rich.

Problems of aggregation are notoriously difficult, but neither prioritarians nor egalitarians need to be saddled with the view that the Rich should be given *absolute* priority over the Super-rich. The question is whether the Rich should be given *any* priority over the Super-rich, strictly in virtue of the fact that they are worse off. I leave to committed prioritarians the task of taking up Crisp's challenge on behalf of prioritarianism. However, since the Beverly Hills case also threatens egalitarianism, I shall offer some egalitarian responses to Crisp's example. I shall do that in Sections IV and V, but, first, it will be useful to characterize egalitarianism.

### III. EGALITARIANISM

Egalitarians come in many stripes. Too many, I'm afraid. Numerous, quite distinct, positions have been described as egalitarian. Correspond-

4. An editor of *Ethics* has suggested that Crisp is working with an eviscerated concept of *compassion*. Thus, contra Crisp, it might be argued that compassion is often warranted for people whose lives are "sufficiently" good, e.g., when such people lose a loved one or are treated unfairly. I think that this is right, but, for this article's purposes, I am willing to grant Crisp's use of *compassion*. Crisp could always use another term in describing his view, or he could explicitly acknowledge that he is employing a restricted sense of *compassion*. Whatever we choose to call our attitude toward those whose lives are not "sufficiently" good, Crisp's interesting substantive question is whether there could be any reason to give priority to a worse-off person over a better-off person when both have lives that are "sufficiently" good.

ingly, in discussing equality, it is important that one clarify the sense in which one is using the term.

On the view of egalitarianism discussed in this article, equality is a subtopic of the more general—and even more complex—topic of fairness. Specifically, concern about equality is a portion of our concern about fairness that focuses on how people fare relative to others. So, our concern for equality is not separable from our concern for a certain aspect of fairness; they are part and parcel of a single concern.

Egalitarians generally believe that it is bad for some to be worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own. This is because, typically, if one person is worse off than another through no fault or choice of her own, the situation seems comparatively unfair, and, hence, the inequality will be objectionable.

Egalitarians are not committed to thinking that deserved inequalities are as bad as undeserved ones. In fact, I think that deserved inequalities, if there are any, are not bad at all. The reason for this is simple. *Undeserved* inequality is unfair, but *deserved* inequality is not. Thus, the egalitarian is *not* committed to the view that it is bad with respect to equality for parents or citizens to freely and rationally sacrifice for their descendants so that their descendants will be better off than they. Nor is the egalitarian committed to the view that it is bad with respect to equality for imprisoned criminals to be worse off than regular citizens, if she believes that the criminal could have been as well off as others but freely chose a life of crime. In such cases, the worse-off are so by their own free choice, and the way in which this is so makes it seem that the unequal outcomes are not unfair, and, hence, are not objectionable. These cases differ from those where the worse-off are so because they were unlucky enough to be born into poverty, or with severe handicaps, or with the “wrong” color skin in a racist society.

Opponents sometimes try to saddle egalitarians with the view that *all* inequalities are bad. This is a ludicrous position that no egalitarian accepts. Egalitarians needn't object to the fact that there are more electrons than protons, or more roaches than whales. Nor need they object to inequalities of height or hair color, considered just by themselves. This may seem obvious, but it is connected to a significant point. Egalitarians aren't simply concerned with *how much* inequality obtains in a situation; they are concerned with how *bad* a situation's inequality is. While there may be *more* inequality in one situation than another, that needn't be *worse* if the greater inequality is morally irrelevant, deserved, or of less normative significance than the lesser inequality.<sup>5</sup>

Egalitarianism, as discussed in this article, is an example of what

5. See, e.g., pp. 17–18 and 35 of my *Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Derek Parfit has called *telic* egalitarianism.<sup>6</sup> Telic egalitarians are concerned with inequality's impact on the goodness, or desirability, of outcomes. They believe that inequality among equally deserving people makes an outcome *bad* in one respect. In contrast, *deontic* egalitarians believe that there is a *duty* to promote equality independent of the extent to which this produces a better outcome, though other duties may conflict with this duty.

The view discussed in this article is also an example of *noninstrumental* egalitarianism. On this view, equality, understood as comparative fairness, is intrinsically valuable, in the sense that it is sometimes valuable in itself, over and above the extent to which it promotes other ideals. On *instrumental* egalitarianism, by contrast, the value of equality is wholly derived from the value of other ideals whose nonegalitarian goods it promotes. On instrumental egalitarianism, the ideal of equality does not play a fundamental role in one's account of the moral realm. On noninstrumental egalitarianism, equality is a distinct moral ideal with independent normative significance. Thus, a complete account of the moral realm must allow for equality's value.

It is, of course, extremely difficult to determine when inequalities *are* comparatively unfair, and a complete resolution of this question might require a solution to the problem of free will. In addition, even if we could determine which inequalities involve comparative unfairness, it is extremely difficult to determine how bad a situation's inequality is. Even so, I think significant progress can be made in our understanding of egalitarianism and its implications once we recognize the intimate connection between equality and comparative fairness.<sup>7</sup>

Egalitarians are often accused of engaging in "the politics of envy." But surely not all egalitarians are "maliciously covetous or resentful of the possessions or good fortune of another" (as *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines the term *envious*)? For example, egalitarians who feel guilty about their own good fortune needn't be *envious* of their own good fortune. Likewise, egalitarians who condemn past inequalities between clan leaders and their followers needn't be "maliciously covetous" or "resentful" of the clan leader's possessions or good fortune. Indeed, they may well believe, rightly, that they are much better off than the clan leader ever was, and that, for a multitude of reasons, the clan leader is more to be pitied than envied (though perhaps his followers should be pitied even more!). Rather, egalitarians believe that these are cases where it is bad—because unfair—for some to be worse off than

6. Derek Parfit introduces the terminology of *telic* and *deontic egalitarianism* in "Equality or Priority?" Corresponding notions are also introduced in chap. 1 of my *Inequality*, p. 11.

7. My book *Inequality* attempts to make such progress. It reveals significant complexities in the notion of equality.

others through no fault or choice of their own. Thus, egalitarians' judgments are not motivated by envy but by a sense of *fairness*; at least, that is what their judgments *should* be motivated by, whether considering other societies or their own.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, let me add that any reasonable egalitarian will be a pluralist. Equality is not all that matters to the egalitarian. It may not even be the ideal that matters most. But it is one ideal, among others, that has independent normative significance.<sup>9</sup>

Bearing the preceding in mind, let us now consider how an egalitarian might respond to Crisp's Beverly Hills case.

#### IV. MAINTAINING EGALITARIANISM WHILE ACCOMMODATING CRISP'S INTUITIONS

Pluralistic egalitarians might readily agree that, all things considered, it is better to raise 10,000 Super-rich people by two than 10 Rich people by two. The crucial question is whether one should share Crisp's intuition that there is no reason to give a Rich person any priority over a Super-rich person. I believe that one could accept Crisp's intuitions about the Beverly Hills case and still be an egalitarian. Let me suggest two ways of reconciling these positions.

First, Crisp's description of the case is unfortunate. Although Crisp tells us that the numbers in his diagrams "represent the welfare of each individual in each group" (p. 746) and reminds us regarding a later

8. Crisp speculates that concerns for comparative fairness "have their ultimate source in envy, generalized through sympathy" (p. 749). I find this deeply implausible. My sympathy for you may lead me to adopt your views as my own where I think your views are *reasonable*, but not otherwise. If you unreasonably hate your neighbor, I won't have sympathy for your position, and, hence, I won't be led to harm your neighbor on your behalf. On the other hand, if you have been wronged by your neighbor, I would have sympathy for you, and this might lead me to seek rectification from your neighbor on your behalf. Similarly, only if I think you have a legitimate complaint of *unfairness* regarding how you fare relative to another might I be led to sympathize with your position and regard it as unfair. If I merely think that you are being envious, I won't have sympathy for your situation and, hence, I won't be moved by sympathy to regard your situation as unfair. Nor, in such a situation, would I be moved to act on your behalf to remove the source of your envy. Of course, Crisp may have in mind here an unconscious mechanism that defies my view of the matter. Such claims are notoriously difficult to defeat, but they are also notoriously problematic.

9. Those who want to describe themselves as egalitarians, but who have a different conception of what matters, should explain the sense in which they are egalitarians, and qualify their descriptions accordingly. For example, while I think that prioritarists would do better to eschew labelling themselves as egalitarians entirely—since they don't actually care about the relations between people, and hence about *equality*—if they want to describe themselves as egalitarians, it might be best if they called themselves *nonrelational* egalitarians, or otherwise explicitly acknowledged that they are not concerned with comparative fairness.

example that he is “assuming my *Rich* to be welfare-rich” (p. 754, n. 22), I fear, based on my own initial misinterpretation, that we may intuitively fail to heed these remarks in thinking about the case. Specifically, by titling the case the Beverly Hills case and labeling the two groups as the “Rich” and the “Super-rich,” Crisp invites us to consider whether we should provide bottles of fine wine to the super-rich actress making \$20,000,000 per picture or to the “merely” rich actor making \$1,000,000 per picture. In such cases, we may reasonably assume that both have far more money than they need, neither wants for anything, and, hence, that each is equally well off. That is, we may think that, after a point, merely having more *money* doesn’t make one better off. Correspondingly, even if we share Crisp’s intuitive response, that we have no more reason to give bottles of wine to a Rich person than to a Super-rich person, this may just show that we have lost sight of the fact that the Rich are actually supposed to be *worse off* than the Super-rich. After all, insofar as one implicitly assumes that the Rich and the Super-rich are equally well off, the egalitarian would agree that there was no reason to favor the Rich over the Super-rich, and this might account for any intuitive agreement people share with Crisp about the case.

Second, in my book *Inequality*, I have argued that there were many different aspects of inequality. I argued that each of these aspects represented a plausible position that might underlie and influence our egalitarian judgments.<sup>10</sup> I cannot repeat my arguments for these aspects here, but let me note that, on several aspects, it wouldn’t matter whether we gave some wine to a Rich person or a Super-rich person if both would benefit equally from the wine. For example, on one aspect, we would measure a situation’s inequality as a function of the total deviation from the “closest” situation in which everyone was equal, where the “closest” situation turns out to be the situation’s median level. Since, in the real world, both the Rich and the Super-rich are well above the median level, it won’t matter whether we raise a Rich person or a Super-rich person  $n$  units, as both would increase the total deviation from the median by the same amount. Similarly, there are other plausible aspects that would measure inequality as a function of the size of the gap between either the worst-off people—or all those worse off than the average—and the situation’s average level. On either of these views, the egalitarian could admit that, in a society like ours, it wouldn’t matter whether wine was given to a Rich person or a Super-rich person if they would benefit equally from it. Either way, the situation’s inequality would worsen to the same extent, as the society’s average level would be increased by

10. The interested reader might look at chaps. 2–5 of my *Inequality*, esp. chap. 2.

the same amount, and hence, so would the gaps between the worst-off group, or all those worse off than the average, and the average level.

I submit, then, that Crisp's Beverly Hills case is hardly a knockdown against egalitarianism. Even if one shares Crisp's intuition that it doesn't matter whether one provides the Rich or the Super-rich with wine, there are a multitude of explanations of that intuition that are compatible with egalitarianism.

#### V. DEFENDING EGALITARIANISM AND REJECTING CRISP'S INTUITIONS

Although I think that an egalitarian could accept Crisp's intuitions about the Beverly Hills case, I don't think that she has to. Indeed, I think that there are powerful reasons to reject Crisp's intuitions about the case. Let me illuminate these reasons by considering the case more closely and exploring our reactions to other related examples.

Crisp assumes that we regard it as desirable for the Rich or the Super-rich to receive fine wine and that we should regard it as "somewhat absurd" to think that it might be better for 10 Rich to receive bottles of wine than for 10,000 Super-rich to do so. But, while I readily grant that there are *certain* respects, say regarding beneficence, in which I share his intuitions, in others my intuitions differ markedly from his. In a world where each year "well over 10 million children die . . . from readily preventable causes,"<sup>11</sup> I rail at the prospect of the Rich or the Super-rich getting yet more bottles of fine wine. My thought is: "A pox on both alternatives!" I'd rather see neither group get the bottles of wine than one group get them, one group get them rather than both, and if one group *must* get wine, I'd rather see 10 Rich get bottles than 10,000 Super-rich. Moreover, in the latter case, I wouldn't regard the 10 Rich getting the wine as a particularly desirable outcome but, rather, as the best of two bad outcomes.

Of course, Crisp will share my intuitions to an extent, insofar as the world's needy warrant our compassion and the resources spent on wine could be better spent on helping the needy. But I am making a further—much more controversial—claim. I believe that, even if the resources spent on the Rich and Super-rich couldn't be diverted to aid the needy, there would be *something* bad about using those resources to further indulge the Rich or the Super-rich. What could that "bad" be? For me, it is a matter of comparative unfairness. I believe that it is terribly unfair that, through no fault or choice of their own, some must struggle to survive, and ultimately lose that struggle, while others indulge in

11. Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 4–5. Unger claimed that, when he wrote his book in 1995, this statistic had been true for each of the preceding thirty years.



extraordinary extravagance. That unfairness is only exacerbated, making an already bad situation even worse, when I imagine even more frivolous luxuries laid in the laps of the Rich or the Super-rich.

Note, as a pluralist, the egalitarian need not claim that it would be better, *all things considered*, for nobody to get the wine than for it to go to the Rich or the Super-rich. Although I incline toward that position myself in such cases, it is enough to defend noninstrumental egalitarianism that there be one important respect in which it would be better for nobody to get the wine. I believe that there is such a respect. It would be better, to some extent, because it is *fairer*.

Crisp claims that giving priority to the less fortunate is best explained by the appropriateness of compassion and that, once people are “sufficiently” well off, compassion gives out. I believe the appropriateness of compassion may be an important *part* of the explanation of why we should sometimes give priority to the less fortunate, but that considerations of fairness are also relevant.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, considerations of fairness are distinct from those of compassion, and they do not give out once people are “sufficiently” well off. In support of these claims, let me offer the following.

First, I can feel compassion for the misery of others, even when it is deserved. But fairness is another matter. Consider two cases. In case 1, John is much worse off than Judy as a result of his own free, fully informed, choice. Specifically, assume that John knew better than to do what he did, ignored his better judgment, and deserved the bad consequences of his choice. However, John now deeply regrets his decision, and he would never make such a choice again. In case 2, John is much worse off than Judy as a result of terrible bad luck: out for a stroll on a beautiful day, a tree suddenly shed a limb that fell on him. Imagine that, in both cases, John is equally miserable. As a compassionate person, I feel a strong pull to aid John in both cases. If I could relieve John of his misery at little cost to myself, I would do so. (Here, I assume that, where John deserves of his plight, helping him won't encourage others to act as he did.)<sup>13</sup> Still, as much as compassion may lead me to help John in *both* cases, overall I feel a much *stronger* pull to help John in the second case.

If helping John would require resources that would otherwise go to a worthy charity, I might help John in case 2 but not in case 1. Why?

12. Crisp doesn't believe that the *feeling* of compassion is relevant, but rather its appropriateness. The virtue of compassion comes into play when the circumstances *warrant* compassion, and it is the presence of such circumstances that carry the moral weight here, not our particular psychological reaction that we identify as compassion. I am grateful to Jeff McMahan for pointing out the need to clarify this point.

13. I am also assuming that the first case is one where we would feel that compassion should temper justice, just as we sometimes believe that mercy should temper justice.

Because in case 2 John's situation strikes me as unfair. He has been the victim of terrible, cosmic, bad luck. After all, millions of people go for walks without being struck down by falling limbs! In case 1, on the other hand, there is nothing *unfair* about John's situation. He is in a bad way, but he is fully responsible for his plight. I suspect that most will share my view and feel quite differently about the priority that John should be given in the two cases. This suggests that fairness and compassion are distinct concerns and that *each* may play a role in our giving priority to some who are worse off than others.

Note that Crisp may try to account for our different reactions to the two cases in terms of compassion itself. He might claim that, while compassion is warranted even for deserved misery, *greater* compassion is warranted for undeserved misery. There is much to be said about such a move, but for now let me simply record my conviction that ultimately it fails to *replace* considerations of fairness with those of compassion; rather, it brings considerations of fairness *into* our understanding of compassion. Of course, to fully defend this conviction, more needs to be said about the connection between desert and fairness. Unfortunately, I cannot pursue that here.

Crisp's Beverly Hills case is unfortunate for many reasons. To really test whether Crisp's view is correct, we should imagine a case where the people involved clearly have lives that are "sufficiently" good and they are the only ones in the situation, or, even better, everyone else is better off. We should also be sure that we aren't inadvertently focusing on mere economic inequality—as we might in thinking about the Rich and the Super-rich—but are thinking about an inequality of what really matters most, say, inequality of welfare, opportunity for welfare, capabilities and functionings, or access to advantages.

Consider the following case. I have two daughters, Andrea and Becky. My daughters aren't super-rich, or even rich by Beverly Hills' standards, but they are incredibly well off. Indeed, by the criteria that truly matter most, they are among a tiny fraction of the most fortunate people who have ever lived. Suppose that the following is true. Both are extremely intelligent and attractive, have deep friendships, a stable home, high self-esteem, rewarding projects, fantastic careers, and a long healthy future. In short, imagine that Andrea and Becky are both destined to flourish in all the ways that matter most. By any reasonable criteria, Andrea and Becky will have "sufficiently" good lives.

Next, suppose that Andrea is a little better off than Becky in all of the relevant categories. So, Andrea is a little smarter, has more rewarding friendships, will live longer, and so on. Moreover, suppose that neither Andrea nor Becky deserves their different fortunes.

Now imagine that Andrea's incredibly good fortune even extends to the most trivial of matters. So, she is just plain lucky in everything

she does. Here is one way in which she is lucky. Every time she takes her weekly walk, she finds a \$20 bill. She doesn't look for money as she walks or take particular routes where she thinks rich people with holes in their pockets tread; she just always comes across money when out walking. Blind luck. Of course, for someone as well off as she is in terms of what truly matters, finding \$20 once a week doesn't make much of a real difference to her life, but she never loses the thrill of finding money, and it invariably brightens her day, bringing a smile to her face and a glow to her heart.

Becky, on the other hand, doesn't share her sister's incredible luck. She walks even more regularly than Andrea, and she takes similar paths at similar times. Moreover, she scans the path as vigilantly as Andrea does. But, for some reason, she never finds any money. Of course, in a life as fulfilling as hers, this hardly matters; it simply means that she misses the excitement Andrea feels when she comes across money, together with its attendant outward smile and inward glow.

Finally, let us suppose that Becky isn't the least bit envious of Andrea's good fortune. Perhaps she is innocently unaware of it, or perhaps she is so kindhearted that she wouldn't be envious of Andrea's good fortune even if she knew about it—she would just be happy for her.

Now suppose I knew all of this and was out walking with my daughters. If I came across a \$20 bill on the path, I would, if I could, cover it with my foot until Andrea passed and then uncover it in time for Becky to discover that wonderful pleasure of "finding" money on a walk. More generally, I would want Becky to benefit from a "windfall" rather than Andrea, to make up for the fact that Andrea was already destined to be better off than Becky over the course of her life.

On Crisp's view, since Andrea and Becky both clearly lead "sufficiently" good lives, compassion won't enter into the situation, and, hence, there would be *no* reason to give Becky priority over Andrea. I think Crisp is half right. I agree that, in this case, I wouldn't feel compassion for Becky. Her life is not miserable or lacking in any of the ways that matter most. Still, I would give Becky priority in the manner suggested. Prioritarians would also give Becky priority over Andrea. And they might appeal to this example to support the view that giving priority to the worse off doesn't depend on compassion and doesn't lose all its force once people are sufficiently well off. However, prioritarians still have to meet Crisp's challenge. They must explain *why* we feel Becky should get priority over Andrea in such a case—unless, they just stick with the simplest answer that it is because she is worse off! This, of course, would be to simply assert what Crisp challenges them to defend, namely, that prioritarianism is a legitimate moral principle.

Egalitarians, on the other hand, have an answer to Crisp's challenge. It is pure luck that Andrea continually finds money and Becky

doesn't. It is pure luck that Andrea is better off in a multitude of ways that matter. Hence, Becky is not merely worse off than Andrea; she is worse off through no fault, or choice, of her own. Egalitarians believe that this crucial fact about the relation between Becky and Andrea provides them with reason to give Becky priority over Andrea: not the reason provided by compassion, but the reason of equality, or comparative fairness.

Note that, if someone were to claim, on Becky's behalf, that it wasn't fair that she never found money while her sister always did, it would be no *answer* to that claim for someone to retort that "nobody ever said that life is fair." To the contrary, such a cynical retort vindicates the egalitarian's view of the situation, even when it is offered in support of the view that we needn't do anything on Becky's behalf. The egalitarian is acutely aware that "life isn't fair." That is the starting point of her view. What separates the egalitarian from the anti-egalitarian is the way she reacts to life's unfairness. The essence of the egalitarian's view is that comparative unfairness is bad and that if we *could* do something about life's unfairness, we have some reason to do so. Such reasons may be outweighed by other reasons, but they are not, as anti-egalitarians suppose, entirely without force.

Finally, consider the difference between three scenarios involving Andrea, Becky, and millions of others. In each, Andrea and Becky are as described above, but everyone else's situations vary. In the first scenario, Andrea and Becky are by far the best off. In the second scenario, as well off as they are, Andrea and Becky are by far the worst off. In the third scenario, Andrea is the best off and Becky is the worst off. Now assuming that everyone is equally deserving, how would we respond in the different scenarios to the prospect of Andrea always finding \$20 bills versus Becky doing so? On Crisp's view, since Andrea and Becky are both "sufficiently" well off, we would give *no* priority to Becky finding the money rather than Andrea in *any* of the scenarios and no priority to Andrea and Becky finding the money in the second scenario, rather than any of their contemporaries. On prioritarianism, Becky would have greater priority than Andrea, but the extent to which it would be desirable for them to find the money would be exactly the same in each scenario. On egalitarianism, it would be more desirable for Becky to find the money in the second and third scenarios than in the first, more desirable for Andrea to find the money in the second scenario than in the first and third, more desirable for Andrea and Becky to find the money in the second scenario than for their contemporaries to do so, and more desirable for Becky to find the money than Andrea in each scenario but particularly so in the third. Suffice it to say, I find the egalitarian judgment of these scenarios compelling. To my mind, there is at least *one* important respect in which it makes a difference to the

desirability of Becky or Andrea finding the money which scenario obtains. Of course, not everyone shares my intuitions. Those who don't may side with Crisp or the prioritarians. But for the rest, and there are many such people, I believe the best account of such cases appeals to the value of equality as comparative fairness.

#### VI. THE WIDE PERSON-AFFECTING PRINCIPLE, THE WELFARIST RESTRICTION, AND THE LEVELLING DOWN AND RAISING UP OBJECTIONS

Many who reject egalitarianism are led to do so by the Levelling Down or Raising Up Objections. Roughly, the Levelling Down Objection claims that there is *no* respect in which a situation is normatively improved *merely* by levelling down a better-off person to the level of someone who is worse off; likewise, the Raising Up Objection claims that there is *no* respect in which a situation is normatively worsened merely by improving some people's lives. But, it is claimed, since levelling down may undeniably decrease inequality and since raising up may undeniably increase inequality, this shows that there is *nothing* valuable about equality *itself* and, hence, that substantive noninstrumental egalitarianism must be rejected.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the Levelling Down and Raising Up Objections have great intuitive appeal but that they derive much of their force from a position I call the *Slogan*, according to which one situation *cannot* be worse than another *in any respect*, if there is *no one* for whom it is worse in any respect.<sup>14</sup> I have shown that the Slogan must be rejected, and I have contended that this deprives the Levelling Down and Raising Up Objections of much of their rhetorical force.

Some accept my claims about the Slogan but still find the Raising Up and Levelling Down Objections crushing against noninstrumental egalitarianism. Most such responses turn on rejecting the Slogan, as a *narrow* person-affecting principle, in favor of a *wide* person-affecting principle that assesses the goodness of alternative outcomes, not in terms of how the particular people who would be in each outcome would be affected for better or worse but, rather, in terms of how people are

14. See chap. 9 of my *Inequality*, as well as my "Harmful Goods, Harmless Bads" (in *Value, Welfare, and Morality*, ed. R. G. Frey and Christopher Morris [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], pp. 290–324), and my "Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection" (in Clayton and Williams, eds., pp. 126–61). My first discussion of this topic appeared in early drafts of my 1983 Princeton University Ph.D. dissertation, also titled *Inequality*. This discussion helped define and motivate prioritarianism—which I then called "extended humanitarianism"—as an alternative to "genuine" egalitarianism—which I now call noninstrumental egalitarianism. I noted that prioritarianism was often conflated with egalitarianism, could avoid the Levelling Down Objection, and might appear to many as the most plausible alternative to egalitarianism.

affected, for better or worse, in each outcome.<sup>15</sup> Thomas Scanlon once wrote “rights . . . need to be justified somehow, and how other than by appeal to the human interests their recognition promotes and protects? This seems to be the uncontrovertible insight of the classical utilitarians.”<sup>16</sup> Followers of the view in question extend the “uncontrovertible insight” beyond rights to the entire moral domain. As Crisp puts the point, “the worry arises from the idea that what matters morally could be something that was independent of the well-being of individuals” (p. 747).

I agree that one could reject the Slogan and still endorse the Levelling Down and Raising Up Objections by moving to a wide person-affecting principle. Moreover, I grant that, like the narrow person-affecting principle, the wide person-affecting principle has great initial appeal. But while a wide person-affecting principle can handle one of the Slogan’s problems, namely, the Non-Identity Problem, it can’t handle any of the other problems facing the Slogan.<sup>17</sup> For example, most firmly judge that there is at least *one* respect in which vicious sinners faring better than saints is worse than the sinners and saints both getting what they deserve, even if the saints are just as well off in the two alternatives. But neither the Slogan nor the wide person-affecting principle can capture this judgment. Thus, like the Slogan, the wide person-affecting principle is unable to capture the noninstrumental value of proportional justice, a value to which many are committed. More generally, the wide person-affecting principle has the same fundamental shortcoming as the narrow principle, namely, it allows *no* scope for *any* impersonal noninstrumental ideals.

To clarify my worry, let me explain the distinction between *personal* and *impersonal* noninstrumental ideals. Recall that earlier I characterized a *noninstrumental* ideal as an ideal that was intrinsically valuable in the sense that its realization was sometimes valuable in itself, over and above the extent to which it promoted other ideals. Noninstrumental ideals have independent normative significance, and a complete account of the moral realm must allow for their value. Let us define *personal* noninstrumental ideals as ideals whose noninstrumental value lies in the contribution they make, when realized, to individual well-being. Such

15. Advocates of this kind of view include Nils Holtug, in “Good for Whom?” (forthcoming, *Theoria*); Brett Doran in “Reconsidering the Levelling-Down Objection against Egalitarianism,” *Utilitas* 13, no. 1 (March 2001): 65–85; and Campbell Brown, “How to Have the Levelling Down Intuition and Reject the Slogan Too” (Australian National University, unpublished, 2001).

16. T. M. Scanlon, “Rights, Goals, and Fairness,” *Erkenntnis* 11 (1977): 81–95; this is reprinted in *Public and Private Morality*, ed. Stuart Hampshire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 93.

17. Derek Parfit first identified the Non-Identity Problem and demonstrated its devastating implications for narrow person-affecting principles in pt. 4 of *Reasons and Persons*.

ideals are noninstrumentally valuable because of the extent to which their realization is good *for* people. In contrast, let us define *impersonal* noninstrumental ideals as ideals whose noninstrumental value lies partly, or wholly, beyond any contributions they make, when realized, to individual well-being. We might say that, qua being impersonal, such ideals are noninstrumentally valuable because of the extent to which their realization makes an outcome good, independently of, or beyond, the extent to which they are good *for* people.

Utility might be an example of a personal noninstrumental ideal. (Henceforth, I omit the qualifier “noninstrumental.” Our discussion is only concerned with noninstrumental ideals, since the value of any instrumental ideal is always derived from the value of the noninstrumental ideal(s) it promotes.) Freedom might be either a personal or an impersonal ideal, depending on whether its value lies solely in the extent to which freedom is good *for* people (that is, promotes individual well-being), or whether it sometimes contributes to the goodness of outcomes beyond the extent to which is good *for* people. As presented in Section III, equality exemplifies an impersonal ideal, as equality is supposed to make an outcome better independently of its effects on individual well-being.

My worry about wide person-affecting principles should now be clearer. I believe that many ideals, including justice and equality, are impersonal, or at least have an impersonal component. Like narrow person-affecting principles, wide person-affecting principles rule out *all* such ideals. I find this deeply implausible.

Let me expand on the nature of my worry. Although a definitive characterization of wide person-affecting views is elusive, in essence, advocates of such views endorse (something like) the following two claims: claim 1, only sentient individuals are the proper objects of moral concern; and claim 2, for purposes of evaluating outcomes, individual well-being is *all* that matters. Although both claims are questionable, for argument’s sake I am willing to accept claim 1. But claim 1 must be carefully interpreted if it is not to be deeply misleading. For example, claim 1 is most plausible—though still questionable—insofar as it asserts the moral primacy of sentient individuals, as opposed to groups or societies. But, importantly, sentient individuals are not merely the *objects* of moral concern; they are also the *source* of moral concerns, and of both moral and nonmoral values. Thus, for example, rational agents can give rise to moral concerns and values that nonrational sentient beings cannot.

Once one recognizes that sentient individuals are not merely the *objects* of moral concern but also the *source* of moral concerns and values, claim 2 loses its appeal. For purposes of evaluating outcomes, why should we only care about the *well-being* of individuals? Why shouldn’t we *also*

care about whether moral agents get what they deserve (justice), or about how individuals fare relative to others (equality), or about whether rational agents have acted freely, autonomously, or morally? Most humans have extraordinary capacities beyond their capacity for well-being. These capacities serve as a source of impersonal value, for example, the impersonal value that can be found in friendship, love, altruism, knowledge, perfection, beauty, rights, duty, virtue, and truth.<sup>18</sup> None of these values arise in a world devoid of sentient beings, and that truth may underlie the appeal of claim 1. But, importantly, such values *do* arise when rational or moral agents stand in certain relations to each other or the world. Moreover, I submit that the value of such relations cannot be best understood instrumentally, nor does it lie *solely* in the extent to which such relations promote individual well-being. Individual well-being is valuable, but in my judgment it is a grotesque distortion of the conception of value to think that it is the *only* thing that matters for the goodness of outcomes.<sup>19</sup>

Interestingly, Crisp sees the force of proportional justice, and so he incorporates it into his welfarist restriction, according to which: “In choices affecting neither the number nor the identities of future people, any feature of an outcome O that results in any individual in that outcome being (undeservedly) worse off than in some alternative outcome P cannot count in favor of O, except to the extent that another in O might be made (not undeservedly) better off” (pp. 747–48).<sup>20</sup> But most

18. I here offer a representative, but by no means definitive, list of factors that some have thought correspond to impersonal moral ideals. It is merely intended to give some sense for what is at stake if we accept the person-affecting principle’s implication that *all* impersonal ideals must be rejected. Presumably, the philosopher’s mantra of “knowledge for knowledge’s sake” would need to be rejected or revised as misleading rhetoric. So, too, would the insight underlying Keats’s famous contention in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”—that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

19. If one has a wide enough conception of individual well-being, one can make room for all ideals as personal rather than impersonal and then accept the wide person-affecting principle or Crisp’s welfarist restriction. John Broome advocates this kind of position in his excellent book, *Weighing Goods* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). Hence, Broome is able to advocate a version of the wide person-affecting principle, which he calls the principle of personal good. I don’t, myself, believe it is plausible to construe individual well-being as widely as Broome, but, of course, if one construes it widely enough, then, as Broome argues, ideals like equality and justice will count as good *for* people, and the Levelling Down Objection will fail. The difference between Broome’s view and my own on this point is discussed further in my “Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection.”

20. Crisp’s welfarist restriction is equivalent to the Slogan, or narrow person-affecting principle, except that he has (conveniently!) tailored the principle to avoid the two main objections I raised to the Slogan. By restricting the principle to same people cases, Crisp avoids the Non-Identity Problem, and, by incorporating considerations of desert, he avoids worries about proportional justice. Or he tries to anyway, as we shall discuss next.



advocates of a “pure” wide person-affecting view will ask why the parenthetical qualifications of “deservedly” and “not undeservedly” appear in the articulation of a *welfarist* restriction. Desert is one thing, welfare another, and it is hard to see how Crisp can reconcile allowing desert to have weight with his earlier expressed doubt “that what matters morally could be something that was independent of the well-being of individuals” (p. 747). Unfortunately, Crisp’s qualifying remarks about desert seem ad hoc, inserted to respond to the intuitive force of proportional justice.

I can see why someone might believe that there are no impersonal ideals. Or, alternatively, why someone might think that there are many. But why believe that there must be exactly *one* impersonal ideal, proportional justice? If the welfarist restriction is qualified to allow for the impersonal value of desert, why shouldn’t it also be qualified to allow for the impersonal value of comparative fairness? It might then hold the following: “In choices affecting neither the number nor the identities of future people, any feature of an outcome O that results in any individual in that outcome being (undeservedly or comparatively unfairly) worse off than in some alternative outcome P cannot count in favor of O, except to the extent that another in O might be made (not undeservedly or comparatively unfairly) better off.” But then why not further qualify the “welfarist” restriction to allow for any other genuine impersonal values? Unsurprisingly, this would abandon the spirit of the wide person-affecting principle that Crisp appeals to in favor of the view that what is relevant to the assessment of outcomes is welfare, together with all genuinely impersonal ideals. Naturally, Crisp wouldn’t want this. But in the absence of an argument showing that desert is the only impersonal ideal, it isn’t clear that we should accept Crisp’s welfarist restriction.

In light of the foregoing, let us return to the Levelling Down and Raising Up Objections. Isn’t it unfair for some to be worse off than others through no fault of their own? Isn’t it unfair for some to be born blind while others are not? And isn’t unfairness bad? These questions, posed rhetorically, express the fundamental claims of the noninstrumental egalitarian. Once one rejects the person-affecting principles as capturing the *whole* of morality relevant to assessing outcomes, there is little reason to forsake such claims in the face of the Raising Up and Levelling Down Objections.

But, the anti-egalitarian will incredulously ask, do I *really* think that there is some respect in which only some being blind is worse than all being blind? Yes. Does this mean that I think it would be better if everyone else was blind? No. As noted previously, equality is not all that matters. But it does matter *some*.

Consider the following example. Many children fear death. Parents

who don't believe in an afterlife are often at a loss as to what they can honestly say to assuage their children's concerns. And, in truth, there is not much one can say that will genuinely answer their children's worries. So, instead, grasping, parents often make a lot of orthogonal points—about how the old must make way for the young, about how much of what we appreciate about life is related to death, and so on. And one point parents often emphasize is how death is a part of life, that, in fact, *everyone* dies, and indeed, that *all* living things die.

It is striking that one should hope or expect the universality of death to provide comfort to one worried about his or her own death. After all, the fact that everyone else will *also* die doesn't lessen the terror of one's own death. Yet, somehow, it seems worth noting that we *all* face the same predicament. *Each* who lives inevitably dies.

But suppose that it wasn't that way. Suppose that some people accidentally stumbled across and ate some rare berries that miraculously made them immortal. So while some people died, others lived forever. What should one then say if one's child lamented that she didn't want to die, and then added the plaintive complaint that "It wasn't *fair*!" Why, as one's child might put it, should *she* have to die, when Katie doesn't have to! Here, I believe, the charge of unfairness strikes deep and true. The situation *would* be unfair, *terribly* unfair, and this would be so even if the immortality berries weren't worse for those who remained mortal but merely better for those who received eternal life.

Does this mean that it would be worse, all things considered, to give some people, rather than no one, such berries? Not necessarily. But I'm glad I don't face such a decision. For as great as the gains of immortality might be for the fortunate ones, the resulting unfairness would be of cosmic proportions. It would be, to my mind, terribly unfair, and to that extent bad. So I contend that, here, as before, something can be bad in an important respect, even if there is no one for whom it is bad.<sup>21</sup>

Advocates of the Raising Up and Levelling Down Objections are among the many anti-egalitarians mesmerized by "pure" equality's terrible implications. But, of course, equality is not the only ideal that would, if exclusively pursued, have implausible or even terrible implications. As I have noted elsewhere, the same is true of justice, utility, freedom, and probably every other substantive ideal. This doesn't show that we should reject each of these ideals, only that morality is complex.<sup>22</sup>

21. Note that the situation's fundamental unfairness doesn't depend on whether my child knows that Katie will live forever. Moreover, her *feelings* about the unfairness are not what matters here. It matters that the situation *is* unfair, whether or not she knows it or it affects her adversely.

22. See, e.g., chap. 9 of my *Inequality*, as well as my "Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection."

The main lesson of the Raising Up and Levelling Down Objections is that we should be pluralists about morality. Egalitarians have long accepted this lesson. Unfortunately, the same cannot always be said for their opponents.

#### VII. CONCLUSION

Often when we give priority to one person over another, this is because the one person's plight warrants our compassion more than the other person's. Crisp is surely right about this. Unfortunately, Crisp contends that compassion is the only legitimate basis for giving one person priority over another. I believe he fails to make his case for this stronger claim. However successful Crisp may be in challenging prioritarianism, he has not undermined egalitarianism. To the contrary, thinking about the Beverly Hills case and related examples only strengthens my conviction that equality, understood as comparative fairness, matters.