

Prioritarianism

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Abstract

Prioritarianism can usefully be seen as a corrective to both egalitarianism and utilitarianism. It allegedly corrects for egalitarianism insofar as it tends toward equality but seems immune to the Leveling Down Objection. It allegedly corrects for utilitarianism insofar as it emphasizes improving peoples' lives but is distribution-sensitive, favoring benefiting those who are worse off over those who are better off, other things equal. The best way to understand the view and assess its prospects is to see whether on closer examination it can indeed avoid the pitfalls of the two more traditional views it might replace. What emerges from such a closer examination is that prioritarianism must be very carefully specified to avoid the Leveling Down Objection. More significantly, to clearly avoid problems associated with utilitarianism, prioritarianism must be formulated in deontic rather than telic terms. It is not clear, however, that such a deontic prioritarianism has any advantages over deontic egalitarianism.

Prioritarianism, or the Priority View, was first introduced explicitly by Derek Parfit.¹ He originally defined it as follows: 'Benefitting people matters more the worse off these people are [in absolute terms]' (Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?' 101).² This is inexact, and thus can be interpreted in a variety of ways, most importantly because there are different ways to interpret or operationalize how benefitting those who are worse off 'matters more'. The most favored interpretation is that the moral significance of marginal benefits is indexed to the level of welfare of the individual to whom they accrue. In other words, increases in welfare are worth less, in moral terms, the better off the recipient is in absolute terms. For any given person, then, each additional unit of welfare is morally less significant – counts less, in moral terms.³ Parfit seems to have this interpretation in mind when he suggests that while utilitarians believe that resources have declining marginal utility, prioritarians believe, in addition, that '*utility* has diminishing marginal *moral importance*' (Parfit, 'Equality or Priority' 105).⁴

Prioritarianism can usefully be seen as a corrective to both egalitarianism and utilitarianism.⁵ Egalitarianism comes in many forms, of course. But the most straightforward form, which has come to be known as telic (short for teleological) egalitarianism, is the view that it is bad in itself if some people are worse off than others.⁶ This form of egalitarianism, it has been pointed out, has a troubling consequence: If it is in itself bad that some people are worse off than others, then in at least one respect (in terms of equality), an initially unequal situation can be improved by simply making the better-off as badly off as the worse-off – by leveling down the better-off to the level of the worse-off, as in Fig. 1, where (following a well-established convention) the width of each column represents the size of the population while the height represents how well each person in that population is faring in that state of affairs.

Following Parfit, this objection has come to be known as the Leveling Down Objection.⁸ The most common way to support the Leveling Down Objection is to insist that it is absurd to hold that one situation can be better (worse) than another *in any respect* if no one is better (worse) off.⁹ Prioritarianism seems to be a corrective for (telic) egalitarianism because it (i) tends toward equality in virtue of its prioritizing benefitting (and avoiding burdening) those who are

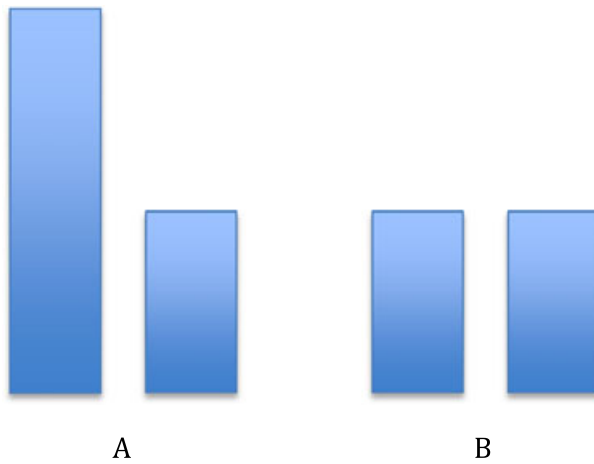


Figure 1. The Leveling Down Objection.⁷

worse off in absolute terms, but (ii) seems immune to the Leveling Down Objection because the only way a situation can be improved in prioritarian terms is by improving someone's condition.

Utilitarianism too comes in many forms. But most are subject to the complaint that they are insensitive to distribution: a benefit (or burden) has the same moral value (or disvalue) whether it redounds to a person who is very well off or someone who is very badly off.¹⁰ Many are inclined to think that if it is possible to equally benefit one of two people, one of whom is better off than the other in absolute terms, there is, other things equal, a stronger reason to benefit the person who is worse off. Prioritarianism directly corrects for this distributional insensitivity by attaching greater moral weight to benefits (and burdens) insofar as the beneficiary is worse off in absolute terms.

Insofar as prioritarianism is seen as a corrective for both (telic) egalitarianism and utilitarianism, the best way to understand the view and assess its prospects is to see whether on closer examination it can indeed avoid the (alleged) pitfalls of the two more traditional views that it might replace.

I

Consider first the Leveling Down Objection. Some think that egalitarians, even telic egalitarians, should not worry too much about the Leveling Down Objection.¹¹ Larry Temkin, for instance, has emphasized two points in defending (telic) egalitarianism against the Leveling Down Objection: (1) The view apparently underlying the Leveling Down Objection – that one situation can be better (worse) than another in any respect only if some are better (worse) off – should be rejected; (2) Egalitarians can be pluralists, and thus deny that a leveled down state is better all-things-considered even if it is better in some respect. As such, Temkin claims, the implications of the Leveling Down Objection can simply be accepted.¹² Tom Christiano argues that (telic) egalitarianism is not subject to the Leveling Down Objection because egalitarianism with respect to any X entails that more X is better than less, and, as such, a leveled down state is not better *in purely egalitarian terms* because of the reduction in overall utility, or welfare. A different reply to the complaint that (telic) egalitarianism is subject to the Leveling Down Objection is most interesting in the present context: Ingmar Persson and Campbell Brown have both argued that prioritarianism too is subject to the Leveling Down Objection.¹³ So even if the defenses of (telic)

egalitarianism suggested by Temkin and Christiano are inadequate, the Leveling Down Objection provides no reason to favor prioritarianism over (telic) egalitarianism.

Persson argues that prioritarianism is subject to leveling down because according to prioritarianism, the average moral value of benefits (utility) is higher in the leveled down state because the benefits lost by those who are better off have relatively less moral value:

... in the leveling down situation ... there is a reduction of the sum of benefits since the better off lose something, and the worse off gain nothing. But the average moral value of benefits goes up because it is the benefits with the lowest such value that are removed, i.e., the benefits which make some better off than others (Persson, 'Why Levelling Down could be Worse' 4).

The leveled down state, then, is better with respect to the average moral value of benefits (utility). Brown's case that prioritarianism is subject to the Leveling Down Objection is rooted in an analysis of what it is for something to be better in this or that respect. To simplify a bit, according to Brown's analysis, A is better than B in respect *r* if and only if were there no other relevant differences between A and B, the difference between A and B in respect *r* would suffice to make A better all-things-considered. When this analysis is applied to a leveling down situation, Brown claims, the prioritarian 'is committed to the claim that A is better than B, in respect of equality' (Brown 127).

While both Brown and Persson make interesting points that cannot be fully addressed here, at first pass it is not clear that they have shown that prioritarianism is on a par with (telic) egalitarianism with respect to the Leveling Down Objection. Persson is right that in the leveled down state the average moral value of benefits (utility) is higher. But this doesn't seem to matter, because prioritarianism does not assign (final) value to the average moral value of benefits (utility). In the leveled down state, just as the average moral value of benefits is higher, the average height of people might be greater, or the percent of those who like scrambled eggs greater. But this is no embarrassment for prioritarianism because on the prioritarian view there is no value in greater average height or a greater percentage of people liking scrambled eggs. Similarly, then, it is no objection to prioritarianism that in the leveled down state the average moral value of benefits (utility) is greater because what matters to prioritarians – what has final value – is not the average value of benefits but the total value of benefits (utility). The average moral value of benefits (utility) is important only instrumentally: the total value of benefits (utility) will be maximized by maximizing the average moral value of benefits (utility).¹⁴ As such, there is no reason to think that a leveled down state of affairs in which the average moral value of benefits (utility) is higher is thus better *in prioritarian terms*. But what is most compelling about the Leveling Down Objection when applied to (telic) egalitarianism is that the leveled down state is better *in egalitarian terms*. The point is that equality is a kind of value that entails that leveled down states can be better in its own terms. The same, then, seems required in the case of prioritarianism: if the Leveling Down Objection is to have the same force against prioritarianism that it does against (telic) egalitarianism, it must be the case that the leveled down state is better *in prioritarian terms*. But Persson does not seem to have shown this.

If this is right about Persson's case, then it seems that the same can be said about Brown's case that prioritarianism is subject to the Leveling Down Objection. For on Brown's analysis the prioritarian is committed to saying that the leveled down state is better in terms of equality.¹⁵ But equality does not have (final) value according to prioritarianism. So the leveled down state is not better *in prioritarian terms*. Brown claims that this doesn't matter.¹⁶ But it seems that it does if the Leveling Down Objection is to have the same force against prioritarianism that it has against (telic) egalitarianism.¹⁷

Can a case be made that the leveled down state can be better *in prioritarian terms*? There is an interesting case that makes it seem so, though ultimately, I think, it fails to show that the leveled down state can be better in prioritarian terms. Note, first, that leveling down, as it is typically presented, occurs in a single step: the better-off are all at once reduced to the level of the worse-off, as in Fig. 1. But the same result can be achieved in a series of steps. For instance, an initially unequal situation can be converted into an equal situation by first (i) reducing the level of the better-off to a level just below that of the worse-off while raising the level of the worse-off slightly, and then second (ii) converting both groups to the original level of the worse-off, as in Fig. 2.

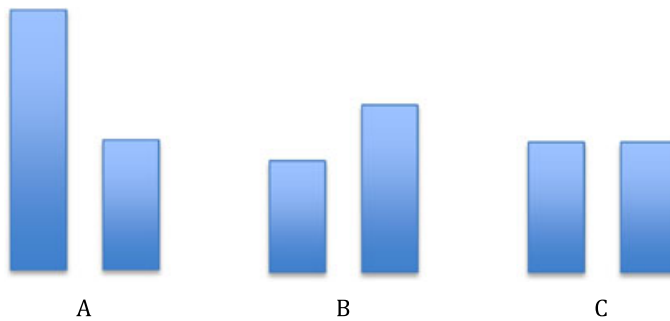


Figure 2. Leveling Down in Two Steps (1).

While neither step is an instance of leveling down, since one population is made better-off in each case, it is quite plausible that in terms of equality B is better than A and C is better than B.¹⁸ By transitivity, then, C is better than A in terms of equality. Yet compared to A, C is an instance of leveling down.

Now consider Fig. 3, which involves a different series of changes:

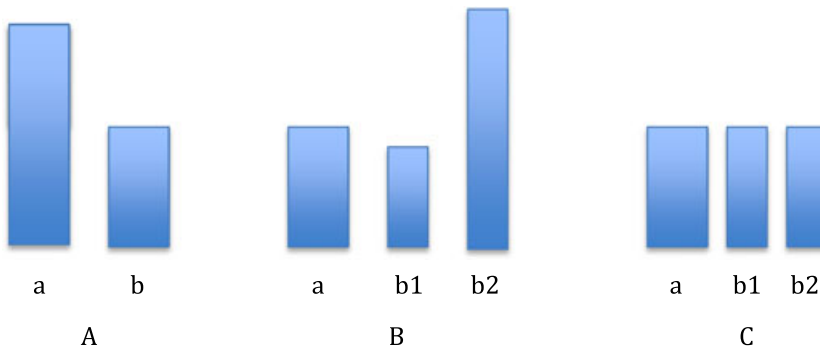


Figure 3. Leveling Down in Two Steps (2).

In A, there are two groups of equal size, with one (a) better off than the other (b). In B, the better-off from A have been reduced to the level of the worse-off in A, while half of the worse-off from A (b1) have been made slightly worse-off while the other half (b2) have been made significantly better off.¹⁹ If *very* high priority is given to the worse-off, then it seems that in prioritarian terms, B can be better than A, as the substantial gains for b2 can outweigh the combined losses of a and b1. In the change from B to C, the half of the worse-off from A made slightly worse-off in B (a1) are made slightly better-off, returning them to their original level in A; the other half (b2) suffer a significant loss, returning them to their original level in A. Once

again, if *very* high priority is given to the worse-off, then it seems that the gains for b1 can outweigh the losses suffered by b2, in which case C can be better than B in prioritarian terms. It seems, then, that it is possible for the leveled down state to be better in prioritarian terms. For *in prioritarian terms*, B seems better than A, and C seems better than B. By transitivity, *in prioritarian terms*, C is better than A.²⁰

This argument that the leveled down state can be better in prioritarian terms, however, rests on a certain interpretation (or operationalization) of Parfit's original definition of prioritarianism, according to which benefitting people matters more the worse off these people are in absolute terms. It multiplies the entire gain (or loss) of the population by a factor associated with that population's level of well-being in the initial state. This differs from the most favored interpretation or operationalization identified at the start, according to which the moral significance of marginal benefits is indexed to the level of welfare of the individual to whom they accrue, such that for a given person, each additional unit of well-being is morally less significant or valuable. And, crucially, on this most favored interpretation, the case that the leveled down state can be better in prioritarian terms falls apart because the gains for b2 don't count as much in the change from A to B (as they would if the entire gain were multiplied by a factor associated with their welfare level in A), and their losses don't count so little in the transition from B to C (as they would if the entire loss were multiplied by a factor associated with their welfare level in B).²¹ What this example shows, then, is not that, generically speaking, the leveled down state can be better in prioritarian terms. Rather, it shows that when considering prioritarianism it is crucial not to rest content with inexact descriptions of the view, because on *some* interpretations compatible with inexact descriptions such as Parfit's original one, it is possible for the leveled down state to be better in prioritarian terms. This is not the case with the most favored interpretation, which adds to whatever other reasons there are for favoring it.

II

Return now to the thought that prioritarianism is a corrective to utilitarianism. Utilitarianism, recall, is thought by many to be unsatisfactory because it is insensitive to distribution: It makes no difference if a similarly-sized benefit or utility gain can be given to a person or group that is badly off or very well-off (in absolute terms), because either way the increase in total utility is the same. This is but one manifestation of a deeper objection to utilitarianism made famous by John Rawls, namely that utilitarianism does not take seriously the moral significance of the separateness of persons.²² This failure is most evident in classic (alleged) counterexamples to utilitarianism in which one or more innocent persons is sacrificed to save a greater number of innocent people, e.g., the famous trolley problem first introduced by Philippa Foot, and 'organ harvesting' cases in which the organs of one person are extracted to save several others needing different organ-transplants.²³ In these cases, there is a balancing of benefits to some against burdens to others, which seems to overlook the significance of the fact that those who are burdened and those who are benefitted are different, or separate, people. Balancing burdens and benefits may be acceptable within a life, or intrapersonally; however, such balancing is dubious across lives, or interpersonally. As Rawls puts it, the problem seems to be that utilitarianism extends

...to society the principle of choice for one man, and then, to make this extension work, conflating all persons into one through the imaginative acts of the impartial sympathetic spectator (Rawls 27).²⁴

It has been argued by Michael Otsuka and Alex Voorhoeve that although prioritarianism may not be distribution-insensitive in the way utilitarianism is, it nonetheless similarly fails to

take seriously the moral significance of the separateness of persons.²⁵ It does so, they claim, for the same reason utilitarianism does: it makes no distinction between the intrapersonal and the interpersonal. Imagine, they ask, a young adult who is now in good health who will soon develop with equal probability either a condition that, if untreated, will result in very severe impairment (entirely bed-ridden) or slight impairment (difficulty walking more than two kilometers). There is a treatment for each, but in order to be effective, a treatment must be administered before it is known which impairment the young adult will suffer if left untreated. Moreover, only one treatment can be taken: if both are taken, neither will be effective. The treatment for the slight impairment will return the young adult to full health, while the treatment for very severe impairment will result in her suffering only a severe impairment (no longer bed-ridden, but requiring assistance to sit up or move about). It is assumed that the young adult is indifferent between the two treatments, and that, as such, each treatment yields the same expected utility.²⁶ Now, suppose you are a 'morally motivated stranger' tasked with selecting which treatment to administer to the young adult, knowing the facts as described above. Otsuka and Voorhoeve claim that in such a case of intrapersonal conflict, 'it would [only] be reasonable for you to share her indifference between these two treatments' (Otsuka and Voorhoeve 173). Had she preferred one or the other, then it would be reasonable to provide the treatment she preferred. In general, then, it only makes sense (for a morally motivated stranger) to maximize her expected utility.²⁷

Now, compare this to a similar interpersonal case, in which there is a group of young adults now in good health. If untreated, half of them will suffer the same very severe impairment; the other half, if untreated, will suffer the same slight impairment. As in the intrapersonal case, there are treatments for each, and the preferences of all members of the group are such that the utility gain from treating a case of very severe impairment is the same as treating a case of slight impairment. Also as in the intrapersonal case, we are to imagine that both conditions can't be treated: one must treat either for the illness that leads to slight impairment or for the illness that leads to very severe impairment, but not both. In this interpersonal case, Otsuka and Voorhoeve claim, the only reasonable thing for a morally motivated stranger to do is to treat those facing very severe impairment.²⁸ While in the intrapersonal case it makes sense to maximize the individual's expected utility, in the interpersonal case it makes sense to favor treating those who if left untreated will be worse-off in absolute terms, even though the expected utility of treating them is no greater than treating those who will be better-off if untreated. There is, then, a (moral) difference between the intrapersonal and the interpersonal. A 'shift is justified in the priority we give to benefiting a person if she is very badly off rather than somewhat badly off,' Otsuka and Voorhoeve conclude, 'when we move from the case of the isolated person to the interpersonal case' (Otsuka and Voorhoeve 176).

It follows from this, Otsuka and Voorhoeve claim, that prioritarianism is unsound, because it recognizes no difference between the intrapersonal case and the interpersonal case. For according to prioritarianism, benefits count more when the recipient is worse off in absolute terms. As such, in both the intrapersonal case and the interpersonal case, a morally motivated stranger should provide treatment for very severe impairment.²⁹

The most obvious response to this line of argument is to simply deny the intuition that in the intrapersonal case, it is (only) reasonable for a morally motivated stranger to share the young adult's indifference between the two treatments – to maximize her expected utility.³⁰ More compellingly, it could be argued, as Martin O'Neill does, that whether one has the intuition or not (to be indifferent between the two treatments in the intrapersonal case), prioritarianism provides good reason to favor the treatment for the very severe impairment in the intrapersonal case. That the young adult is indifferent, O'Neill suggests, tells us only that the well-being gains of either treatment are equally valuable *to her*, or *from her particular point of view*. But, he argues, this does not entail that they are equally valuable from the impersonal, or moral point of view.

It is a mistake, O'Neill says, to think that we can "simply 'read off' the impersonal goodness or value of those different potential outcomes directly from ... [the young adult's] preferences" (O'Neill 338). In claiming that a morally motivated stranger should be indifferent between the two treatments in the intrapersonal case, O'Neill claims, Otsuka and Voorhoeve give insufficient attention to the distinction between value for particular individuals and moral or impersonal value, or value from the impartial point of view.

Otsuka and Voorhoeve recognize that not all will agree that a morally motivated stranger ought to be indifferent – maximize expected utility – in the intrapersonal case. This motivates their introduction of a second pair of cases, one intrapersonal and the other interpersonal. In the second intrapersonal case, a person has a 50% chance of a utility gain and a 50% chance of a smaller utility loss, unless a morally motivated stranger intervenes, in which case the status quo is preserved. In the second interpersonal case, there are two people, equally well-off. Unless a morally motivated stranger intervenes, there is a 50% chance that one will enjoy the same utility gain and a 50% chance that the other will suffer the same smaller utility loss. Otsuka and Voorhoeve claim that while a morally motivated stranger should not intervene in the intrapersonal case, he should in the interpersonal case.³¹ Here too there is a shift toward greater priority to benefitting a person worse off in absolute terms when we move from the intrapersonal case to the interpersonal case. The interpersonal case is different, and the shift warranted, they say, because of the moral significance of the separateness of persons:

... a shift of weighting when we move to the interpersonal case can be resisted only on pain of denying the moral significance of the separateness of persons. This is because a single person has a unity that renders it permissible to balance (expected) benefits and burdens against each other that might accrue to her. A group of different people, by contrast, does not possess such unity. As a consequence, some forms of balancing benefits and burdens that are permitted when these accrue to a single person are impermissible in cases where these benefits and burdens accrue to different people (Otsuka and Voorhoeve 179).

Prioritarianism, however, recognizes no such shift because it maintains that benefits count more when the recipient is worse off in absolute terms. As such, according to prioritarianism, in both the intrapersonal and the interpersonal case, a morally motivated stranger should provide treatment for very severe impairment.³²

Thomas Porter points out that here too prioritarians may deny the intuition that there is a shift in priority in the move from the intrapersonal to the interpersonal case – that a morally motivated stranger should not intervene in the intrapersonal case but should in the interpersonal case.³³ More significantly, he argues that it simply can't be that the moral significance of the separateness of persons disallows trading off gains for one person or group against losses for another person or group. For then, as David Brink has argued, only Pareto improvements will properly respect the moral significance of the separateness of persons. Surely, Porter and Brink agree, some interpersonal balancing of benefits and burdens is compatible with the moral significance of the separateness of persons.³⁴

Of course Otsuka and Voorhoeve do not think that the moral significance of the separateness of persons disallows *any* trading off of gains for some against losses for others. For they are clear (in the quotation above) that it is only *some* forms of balancing benefits and burdens that are permissible in the intrapersonal case that are impermissible in the interpersonal case. But Porter is right that once this is made clear, the critic of prioritarianism has more work to do because it has to be shown that the trade-offs in interpersonal cases sanctioned by prioritarianism are among those that are impermissible because incompatible with the moral significance of the separateness of persons. The prioritarian can argue that trade-offs compatible with prioritizing benefits and burdens to those who are worse off in absolute terms respects the moral significance of the separateness of persons.³⁵

Porter's defense of prioritarianism is important insofar as it shows that it is not obvious what the moral significance of the separateness of persons amounts to – what is compatible with it and what is not. But for those of us who do have the intuition that there is a shift in priority when moving from the intrapersonal to the interpersonal in Otsuka and Voorhoeve's examples, this is evidence that some trade-offs sanctioned by prioritarianism are indeed incompatible with the moral significance of the separateness of persons. The intuition may not be universal, but it is pervasive. Prioritarianism would be on firmer ground, then, if there were a defense compatible with the intuition that there is a shift in priority when moving from the intrapersonal to the interpersonal.

Andrew Williams suggests just such a defense of prioritarianism against Otsuka and Voorhoeve's objection that it fails to respect the moral significance of the separateness of persons.³⁶ His defense involves drawing a distinction between telic and deontic (short for deontological) versions of prioritarianism. Telic prioritarianism, like its egalitarian counterpart, maintains that the good is prior to the right. That is, the goodness or value of (prospective) states of affairs determines what is right – what we ought to do. And what we ought to do is what will lead to the greatest (expected) goodness or value. Telic egalitarianism, as noted at the outset, holds that inequality is bad in itself – that more equal states of affairs are, to that extent, better.³⁷ Telic prioritarianism maintains that states of affairs are better insofar as their weighted utility is greater, with greater weight being attached to utility at lower absolute levels. As such, the right thing to do is whatever has the greatest expected weighted utility.³⁸ Telic prioritarianism, Williams argues, is indeed subject to the criticism leveled by Otsuka and Voorhoeve – the criticism that in recognizing, no distinction between the intrapersonal and the interpersonal; it ignores the moral significance of the separateness of persons. But, he says, just as the egalitarian can adopt a deontic rather than a telic brand of egalitarianism, the prioritarian can adopt a deontic prioritarianism. Deontic egalitarianism rejects the view that we ought necessarily to promote more equal states of affairs because they are better. Similarly, deontic prioritarianism rejects the idea that we ought necessarily to maximize (expected) weighted utility. As such, Williams claims, deontic prioritarianism is not vulnerable to Otsuka and Voorhoeve's objection because it is not wedded to treating intrapersonal and interpersonal cases alike. For the deontic prioritarian can recommend what he calls a *restrictive* brand of deontic prioritarianism that incorporates a distinction between the intrapersonal and the interpersonal. On this restrictive deontic prioritarian view, according to Williams,

... individuals have claims on each other's beneficence but ... the content of those claims differs significantly depending on whether we need to resolve normative conflicts with rather than across lives. In cases involving only intrapersonal conflicts this Restrictive Priority View assumes individuals have a claim that conflicts are resolved in a way that maximizes their expected utility ... In contrast, in cases of interpersonal conflict, individuals have claims to be benefitted that become stronger as their absolute position worsens (Williams 323).

As such, Williams claims, such a restrictive deontic prioritarianism fully takes into account the moral significance of the separateness of persons.

Williams may well be right that deontic prioritarianism along the lines he suggests can avoid the powerful criticism of Otsuka and Voorhoeve. However, one can reasonably think that this victory is something of a Pyrrhic victory. One of the motivations for adopting prioritarianism, as noted at the outset, was to avoid a problem associated with telic egalitarianism, namely the Leveling Down Objection. But, as Parfit noted when he first introduced prioritarianism, deontic egalitarianism is not subject to the Leveling Down Objection because it denies that it is bad in itself if some are worse off than others.³⁹ Otsuka and Voorhoeve re-enforce this by themselves advancing a version of deontic egalitarianism grounded in the contractarian idea that allocations

must be justifiable to each person taken separately. Such a deontic egalitarianism, they claim, avoids the Leveling Down Objection.⁴⁰ The other motivation for prioritarianism was to correct for the distribution insensitivity of utilitarianism. But of course, deontic egalitarianism is distribution-sensitive, favoring providing a benefit to someone worse off over a similar benefit to someone better off, other things equal. So if one is ultimately going to adopt a deontic view, one might just as well adopt deontic egalitarianism and forego the turn to prioritarianism.⁴¹ Prioritarianism may be 'saved' from the separateness of persons objection by going deontic, but it doesn't 'win' over egalitarianism, because it too can be characterized in deontic terms.

Parfit, of course, had concerns about deontic egalitarianism. He worried, in particular, that its scope is too limited – that it could not address inequalities that were not the product of injustice.⁴² But such concerns about (limited) scope would surely equally affect a deontic version of prioritarianism. At this juncture, then, we can say that, at a minimum, we remain in need of a reason to adopt (deontic) prioritarianism rather than (deontic) egalitarianism.

III

The appeal of prioritarianism is that it appears to capture what is good about both egalitarianism and utilitarianism without being vulnerable to powerful objections leveled against those more traditional theories. In particular, prioritarianism tends toward equality like egalitarianism and places primary moral significance on improving the quality of peoples' lives like utilitarianism. However, as we have seen, how priority for those worse off in absolute terms is interpreted or operationalized needs to be carefully specified to avoid the Leveling Down Objection. More significantly, to clearly avoid the charge that it does not adequately take into account the moral significance of the separateness of person seems to require adopting a deontic brand of prioritarianism.⁴³ There is nothing wrong in itself with adopting deontic prioritarianism. However, insofar as deontic egalitarianism is not subject to the Leveling Down Objection or the charge that it fails to respect the moral significance of the separateness of persons, there is, at this juncture, no reason to prefer deontic prioritarianism over deontic egalitarianism.⁴⁴ As such, Parfit's question 'Equality or Priority?' remains a live one.

Short Biography

Michael Weber has published widely in ethics and political philosophy, with emphasis on contemporary egalitarianism, rational choice theory, and ethics and the emotions. His papers have appeared in journals including in *Ethics*, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, *The Canadian Philosophical Review*, *Philosophical Studies*, *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, *The Journal of Ethics and Social Policy*, *The Journal of Ethics*, and *Public Affairs Quarterly*. He has also co-edited two volumes with Christian Coons: *Paternalism: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press), and *Manipulation: Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press). He is currently Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy, Bowling Green State University. He previously taught at Yale University, having earned a PhD in philosophy at the University of Michigan, a BA in Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford, and a BA from Williams College.

Notes

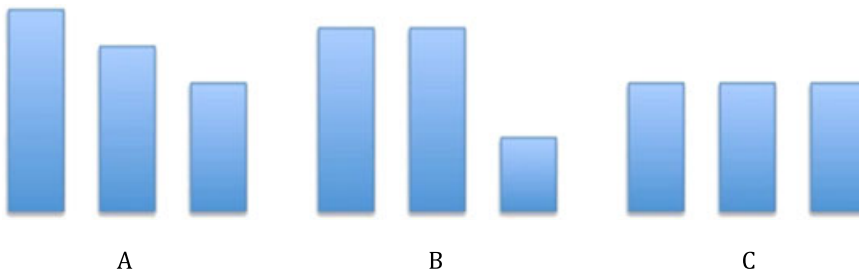
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¹ Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?'

- ² This formulation refers only to benefitting those who are worse off in absolute terms. It seems a natural extension of this view that burdening those who are worse off in absolute terms similarly matters more, as is noted explicitly by Ingmar Persson ('Equality, Priority, and Person-Affecting Value' 26). In a more recent formulation, Parfit ('Another Defence of the Priority View' 401) defines the Priority View as follows: We have stronger reasons to benefit people the worse off these people are. This too is inexact, because there are different ways to interpret or operationalize 'stronger reasons'.
- ³ Campbell Brown (Brown 124–5) gives a clear graphic account of this.
- ⁴ That resources have declining marginal utility is the familiar idea that the more you have of something, e.g., ice cream, or money, the less value more of it has for you. An additional ten dollars has great value to a homeless person; little to a millionaire. Because of the declining marginal utility of resources, utilitarianism typically favors (re-)distributing resources to those who are worse off – a kind of favoritism toward those who are worse off. Prioritarianism, however, goes further in favoring the worse off insofar as it favors (re-)distributing resources to the worse off even if the welfare such resources generate for the worse-off is less than or equal to the welfare they will generate for the better off.
- ⁵ Some think that egalitarianism and prioritarianism should not be seen as rivals. Instead, they should be seen as each capturing an element of the truth about distributive justice, which is complex and pluralistic. See, e.g., Martin O'Neill (O'Neill 341–2). Parfit ('Equality or Priority' 103) suggests this too, though he elsewhere seems to think of prioritarianism as an alternative to both egalitarianism and utilitarianism.
- ⁶ Most egalitarians modify the view to make it 'responsibility-sensitive' by adding that inequalities are bad only if some are worse off through no fault or choice of their own. Prioritarianism seemingly can similarly be rendered responsibility-sensitive by adding that how much it counts morally to benefit a person at a certain welfare level x also depends on the extent to which that person is responsible for being at that level, as Richard Arneson (Arneson) suggests.
- ⁷ There are alternative spellings: 'Leveling Down Objection' and 'Levelling Down Objection'. The former is more common in the United States; the latter in the United Kingdom. I will employ the former, American spelling.
- ⁸ Leveling down can take other forms, e.g., the better-off and the worse-off are both made worse off, though the former more so, such that in the resulting state of affairs, the gap between the better-off and the worse-off is reduced though not eliminated. All that is required for a case of leveling down is that there is an improvement in terms of inequality (without necessarily eliminating inequality) while none are better off.
- ⁹ This is the so-called 'person-affecting view' that Larry Temkin (Temkin, 'Intransitivity and the Mere Addition Paradox' and 'Equality, Priority and the Levelling Down Objection') aims to capture in what he calls *The Slogan*: One situation cannot be worse (or better) than another unless there is someone for whom it is worse (or better). Some doubt whether the Leveling Down Objection depends on *The Slogan*, e.g., Nils Holtug (Holtug).
- ¹⁰ As Persson (Persson 'Prioritarianism') notes, the utilitarian can soften the blow by noting that it is only resources rather than well-being that can be (re)distributed, and resources have diminishing marginal utility. But this only softens the blow, because the complaint about distributive insensitivity is that, other things equal, we should favor providing (the means to) a certain amount of welfare or well-being to someone who is worse off over someone who is better off, and this utilitarianism cannot accommodate.
- ¹¹ Bertil Tungodden (Tungodden), for example, is largely unmoved by the Leveling Down Objection, though he admits he doesn't quite know what to say to those who feel its force. Also see O'Neill (O'Neill). More recently, Parfit (Parfit, 'Another Defence of Prioritarianism' 401) has made it clear that he does not think that the Leveling Down Objection is decisive against telic egalitarianism, because it is not *absurd* to think that a leveled down state is better in some respect. But he continues to think it has some force, and, as such, there is reason to prefer views that are not subject to the Leveling Down Objection. As for deontic egalitarianism, Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen (Lippert-Rasmussen) thinks that it is subject to an objection parallel to the Leveling Down Objection. In his original defense of prioritarianism, Parfit seems to assume deontic egalitarianism is immune from objections of this sort. His reluctance to accept deontic egalitarianism is the product of a worry that its scope is too limited – that it does not condemn inequalities that are not the product of injustice. Lippert-Rasmussen argues, however, that telic and deontic versions of egalitarianism cannot be distinguished in terms of their scope.
- ¹² Parfit (Parfit, 'Another Defence of Prioritarianism' 399) calls people who adopt this view Moderate Egalitarians. He criticizes them on the grounds that we should not only be concerned about what our moral theories say all-things-considered; we should also be concerned about theories that make implausible claims about what makes outcomes better or worse, or make acts right or wrong.
- ¹³ Brown and Persson, 'Why the Levelling Down Objection could be Worse'.
- ¹⁴ As both Persson (Persson, 'Prioritarianism') and Brown (Brown) note, if the sum of utility is fixed, then the total value of utility is necessarily maximized by maximizing the average moral value of benefits (utility), which is achieved by an equal distribution.
- ¹⁵ Brown 127.
- ¹⁶ Brown (Brown 127) surprisingly thinks that the prioritarian reply that he does not care about equality is simply a matter of (irrelevant) psychology.

¹⁷ It is tempting to say here that both Persson and Brown fail to appreciate that ‘better’ can be used both descriptively or normatively: In descriptive terms, the leveled down state is better (where ‘better’ simply means more, or a higher level) in terms of the average value of benefits (utility) or in terms of equality; however, this is not the same as the leveled down state being better normatively (because of these descriptive differences). But I doubt they could be making such an elementary mistake. Unfortunately, however, a full treatment of their claims that prioritarianism too is subject to the Leveling Down Objection is not possible here.

¹⁸ It might be argued that the move from A to B is itself an instance of leveling down, on the grounds that ‘the better off group’ or ‘the worse off group’ should not be associated with the same particular population in the different state of affairs. Rather, the ‘better off in state of affairs X’ is whichever particular group is better off in X; the ‘better off in state of affairs Y’ are those in the better-off group in Y, even if this is a different group of people. Thus, in B, both the better-off and the worse-off are worse off than in A. This is an important objection. However, it does not undermine the claim that leveling down can occur in two steps, neither of which is itself an instance of leveling down. I think that the phenomenon requires three distinct populations, as in the figure below:



¹⁹ For the reasons indicated in the previous note, it may be essential that the population b2 in B is better off than the population a is in A.

²⁰ One way to resist the argument here would be to reject transitivity, as Temkin (Temkin ‘Intransitivity and the Mere Addition Paradox’) has suggested. But this is a price most are unwilling to pay.

²¹ There are in fact a number of ways to show why the argument is unsuccessful on the most favored interpretation or operationalization of prioritarianism. But the core idea is that on the most favored interpretation it is not possible for a leveled down state to be better in prioritarian terms because the interpretation is Pareto-compatible.

²² John Rawls (Rawls 27). It is a manifestation of the more general problem because the quality of individual, distinct lives does not ultimately matter. All that matters ultimately is the aggregate – the combined quality of the individual lives.

²³ Foot.

²⁴ Rawls 27.

²⁵ Otsuka and Voorhoeve.

²⁶ This assumes the orthodox Van Neumann–Morgenstern preference-based measure of utility.

²⁷ Otsuka and Voorhoeve 173.

²⁸ Otsuka and Voorhoeve 174. They note that there is empirical data that this intuition or judgment is not idiosyncratic.

²⁹ Otsuka and Voorhoeve 176–178.

³⁰ Both O’Neill (O’Neill) and Porter (Porter) make this point. Also see Andrew Williams (Williams).

³¹ It is assumed here that the potential gain for the individual in the intrapersonal case is sufficiently greater than the potential loss that, even if gains count more the worse off the recipient is in absolute terms, the potential gains outweigh potential losses. As such, the example does not assume that in the intrapersonal case a morally motivated stranger ought to maximize the individual’s expected utility. See Otsuka and Voorhoeve 179–180.

³² Otsuka and Voorhoeve 180–182.

³³ Porter 355.

³⁴ Porter 356–7 and Brink.

³⁵ See Porter 357–8.

³⁶ Parfit (Parfit, ‘Another Defence of Prioritarianism’ 435) also claims that it is possible for prioritarians to explain the shift when moving from the intrapersonal to the interpersonal. However, this claim comes in the context of an extremely long and detailed reply to Otsuka and Voorhoeve that cannot be easily summarized. As such, it cannot be addressed here due to limitations of space. Parfit directly addresses Otsuka and Voorhoeve’s claim about the shift when moving from the

intrapersonal to the interpersonal in Section VII (pp. 427–436). The full response to Otsuka and Voorhoeve's challenge to prioritarianism spans Section III to Section VII (pp. 412–440).

³⁷ What makes one state better or worse in terms of inequality is terribly complicated, as Temkin, (*Temkin Inequality*) has famously made clear.

³⁸ So telic prioritarianism is a variation on the paradigmatic telic view, namely utilitarianism, according to which the right things to do is to maximize (expected) aggregate utility.

³⁹ Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?'

⁴⁰ Otsuka and Voorhoeve 183–4. As previously noted, some doubt that deontic views are any less subject to the Leveling Down Objection, e.g., Lippert-Rasmussen.

⁴¹ Indeed, this is just what Otsuka and Voorhoeve (Otsuka and Voorhoeve 183–4) do: They argue that a deontic egalitarianism (1) accounts for the shift in priority when moving from intrapersonal to interpersonal cases, and (2) avoids the Leveling Down Objection.

⁴² Parfit, 'Equality or Priority' 88–90.

⁴³ This is bracketing Parfit's (Parfit, 'Another Defence of Prioritarianism') extended reply to Otsuka and Voorhoeve, which, as indicated earlier, cannot be addressed here due to limitations of space. If Parfit's response is successful, *and telic*, then prioritarianism need not be deontic to avoid Otsuka and Voorhoeve's critique.

⁴⁴ It could be argued that deontic egalitarianism, in contrast to deontic prioritarianism, does not capture what is appealing about utilitarianism – the moral importance of improving peoples' lives. The egalitarian can respond in one of two ways. The first and most obvious is to adopt a value pluralism that includes both equality and utility. Larry Temkin (*Temkin, 'Equality, Priority and the Levelling Down Objection'*) has advocated for this approach. Alternatively, it could be argued, following Tom Christiano (Christiano), that utility is 'built in' to equality, on the grounds that it is only when more of any *x* is better that equality matters. The latter, though more controversial, may have one advantage. Parfit suggests that prioritarianism is more appealing than egalitarianism because it can be a 'complete': To be plausible, it doesn't require being coupled with other values, as egalitarianism seems to. If Christiano is right, then egalitarianism too can claim to be a complete.

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