

Sufficiency, Equality, and Priority Notes for Philosophy 167

1. **Equality.** Equality is the view that it is bad if some are worse off than others. Worse off in what way? The egalitarian might prize equality of resources, or social primary goods, or well-being, or capability (real freedom), or might prize equality along some other dimensions.

One might hold that inequality is bad without believing that we are obligated or even permitted to do anything to correct it. Let's say the egalitarian embraces some ideal of equality and holds that achieving equality is a social justice obligation.

Although he calls his view "equality of resources," Ronald Dworkin does not value equality as just described. His view is closer to what Elizabeth Anderson calls "luck egalitarianism" or "equality of fortune." She says the luck egalitarian holds that "the fundamental aim of equality is to compensate people for undeserved bad luck." In Dworkin's own terminology, justice requires that outcomes of brute (unchosen) luck should be equalized but outcomes of option (chosen) luck should be allowed to stand.

A related view holds that it is bad if some are worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own, but it not bad if some are worse off than others through fault or choice.

It is sometimes said that any plausible view of justice will be egalitarian and that theorists differ in their interpretations of what equality requires. The utilitarian believes that each person's happiness should count equally toward determining what should be done: one unit of happiness for one person counts the same as a unit of happiness that accrues to any other person. The libertarian like Robert Nozick believes that all people equally have the same Lockean moral rights, which should be respected. Question: Is this we-are-all-egalitarians position correct or incorrect? Misleading or illuminating?

The view that justice requires equality needs some way to measure degrees of inequality. Given two unequal distributions, which is less unequal or further from equality? Different measures have been proposed.

2. **Sufficiency.** The sufficientarian holds that justice requires that everybody gets "enough," not that everybody has the same. To flesh out this idea one needs answers to two questions: (1) Enough *what?* And (2) How much is *enough?*

Another formulation of sufficientarianism or the doctrine of sufficiency: We ought to bring it about that as many as possible of those who ever live are at a good

enough level of advantage. This formulation renders the doctrine of sufficiency global in scope, but one could also formulate the view so it is limited in scope to the members of a single society.

Among course authors, Amartya Sen (of "Rights and Agency") tends to identify justice with the idea that all people should equally be assured the basic capability (real or effective freedom) to function in important valuable ways. "Basic capability" is capability at a threshold "good enough" level. Elizabeth Anderson opts for what she calls "democratic equality." In the domain of distributive justice, democratic equality requires that each member of society has and gets enough to have the capability to participate fully as an equal in a democratic society. On this view, justice requires (for example) literacy for all, so all can function as equals, but justice is not threatened when some are more literate than others above the threshold assured to all. ship.

Sufficientarians object that egalitarians make a fetish of distributive equality. The real problem of social justice is never merely that some have more than others but that some do not have enough. If some people face grim, horrible life conditions, that is bad, and it would not in any way be better if we all equally faced such conditions.

Compare two different societies. In one, many children are starving (their utility level is -10), while others live acceptable lives (their utility level is 50). In a second society, there is the same degree of inequality, but in this society all people are far above anything that could reasonably be deemed acceptable minimal decent quality of life. There are two groups in this society, the very rich (utility level 240 or bliss) and the extremely rich (utility level 300 or sheer ecstasy).

If what fundamentally matters is equality and what is fundamentally morally bad is inequality, then the egalitarian must say that if the extent of inequality is the same in the two societies, then egalitarian justice is equally violated in the two scenarios. (There is a complication here, because the egalitarian could employ various measures of degree of inequality, but the objection is claimed to hold even when this complication is explored.) But the inequality in society 2, the sufficientarian says, should be strictly a "don't care" from the standard of social justice. So long as everybody has enough, who cares about who has how much above that level? In contrast, in society 1 the inequality is bad, not in itself, but because we suppose it contributes to the horrible badness of the lives of the starving children. The doctrine of sufficiency interprets the example as suggesting that what matters morally is that everyone (as many as possible) have an adequate quality of life, that everybody has enough, not that everyone has the same.

The doctrine of sufficiency opposes the Rawlsian maximin norm of justice for somewhat similar reasons. Maximin holds that justice requires arranging society so that the least advantaged are made as well off as possible. The sufficientarianism regards this as an extreme doctrine. What matters is not that the least advantaged are as advantaged as possible, but that everyone (as many as possible) have enough, an adequate level of advantage.

I suggested above that the doctrine of sufficiency could be formulated to hold on a world-wide scale or it could be restricted to local application, say within a single nation state. The global sufficientarian might criticize Dworkin's view that the requirement that we treat those affected by our actions with equal concern and respect applies especially to the state, since states coerce their members and claim to speak in the name of all members of the nation. This means that equality of resources as interpreted by Dworkin applies to the government of France, which must treat all its members with equal concern and respect, and to the governments of the U.S., Germany, Nigeria, Chad, and so on. The global sufficientarian might say it is morally better if France tolerates inequality of resources among French citizens if that better contributes to sufficiency for all on a global scale than would strict enforcement of equality of resources among the French. (Dworkin need not deny there are obligations of humanity that suggest the French should help poor people on a global scale but he must insist there are special reasons of justice for each government to treat its own members with equal concern and respect.)

3. Sufficiency versus responsibility? As stated, the doctrine of sufficiency does not relax or modify its insistence on sufficiency for all depending on the individual responsibility of members of society for their plight. Anderson exploits this feature of the doctrine to differentiate her position strongly from luck egalitarianism.

One could modify sufficiency to cater to individual responsibility. For example, we might say that the good enough level to be assured to all includes a high school education, but that young people who drop out of school more than three times or fail to complete most school assignments when enrolled are deemed to have had adequate opportunity to earn a high school diploma so their failure to have one does not offend against sufficiency adjusted.

4. Priority. We gain more understanding of equality and sufficiency by contrasting them with a third alternative, priority. On the characterization of priority, see Derek Parfit, "Equality or Priority?". Priority says that it is morally better to gain a benefit or avoid a loss for a person, other things being equal, the worse off the person would be absent this benefit (avoidance of loss). Here "worse" off is to be understood in noncomparative terms. The issue is not how badly off one is compared to other people but how well or badly off one is in

absolute terms as assessed by some measure of advantage. Priority says that if Robinson Crusoe alone on his desert island finds some medicine that cures his chronic cough, the moral value of the advantage is greater, the lower his overall lifetime advantage level absent that benefit. Again, as with the egalitarian and sufficientarian views already discussed, there are different versions of priority depending on the notion of advantage that serves to measure how well off or badly off one is.

Suppose one can choose between gaining a benefit for a person who is very badly off or gaining an identical benefit for a person who is already very well off. Priority says the moral value of getting a same-sized benefit to a person is greater, the worse off in absolute terms she was, over the course of her life, without this benefit.

So far priority is defined just in terms of ranking outcomes as morally better or worse. If we add the idea that policies and actions should be chosen to maximize moral value, then priority is a rival to equality and sufficiency regarded as norms that tell us what we ought to do. The prioritarian holds that actions and policies should be set to maximize moral value and that benefits have greater moral value, the more they accrue to the worse off. One version holds that the moral value of gaining a benefit for a person is greater, the larger the benefit, and greater, the worse off in absolute terms the person was apart from gaining this benefit.

Priority as just characterized is a family of views. One gets a specific principle by fixing what comparative weight should be given to making benefits greater as opposed to making benefits go to the worse off. To illustrate, suppose the correct idea of benefit is utility or human well-being. At one extreme, the prioritarian gives very slight weight to making benefits go to the worse off as opposed to making benefits greater—this position is barely different from straight aggregative utilitarianism. At the other extreme, the prioritarian gives very slight weight to making benefits greater as opposed to making benefits go to the worse off. This extreme weighting renders the prioritarian position barely different from maximin (leximin), the position that one should as a first priority do the best one can for the person who is worst off, as a second priority do the best one can for the person who is second-worst off, and so on up to the best off person).

Let's consider a version of priority that assigns priority weights roughly midway between the straight aggregation at one extreme and the straight maximin at the other extreme. Call this Goldilocks prioritarianism after the fairy tale about the little girl who wanted to avoid extremes and for example preferred soup that was neither too hot nor too cold but just right, a middling temperature.

5. Priority versus sufficiency. The prioritarian partly agrees with the sufficiency doctrine. The area of agreement is that neither view holds that fundamental moral principles that regulate distribution should take it to be intrinsically important how well off one person is compared to others. Rejecting all comparative principles, sufficiency and priority alike reject the principle of equality, a comparative principle.

Priority opposes sufficiency, however. To illustrate the disagreement, consider the prioritarian response to the “two societies” example proposed by the sufficientarian with the aim of discrediting equality. The prioritarian reads the example differently. If the starving children are very badly off, in absolute terms, then it is morally urgent that benefits go to them rather than the people in society who are already well off. In the society where everyone is already extremely well off in absolute terms, it is a bit better to gain an additional benefit for someone at the mere bliss level than to gain a same-sized benefit instead for someone who is far better off (at the ecstasy level). Greater priority kicks in when the issue is whom to benefit in society 1 than when the issue is whom to benefit in society 2. But it is not strictly a “don’t care” whether those in bliss or those in ecstasy benefit, according to the prioritarian, who gives some priority to helping those at mere bliss.

In other examples the disagreement between priority and sufficiency is sharp. Consider two hypothetical cases.

We can choose between policy A and policy B. These are our only choices. Under A, one person is just below the “good enough” threshold and billions of people are living great lives very far above the threshold. Under B, the one is raised just barely over the sufficiency threshold, but the billions are pushed to a much worse standard of living, but they are all still living above the sufficiency threshold.

In this case the sufficientarian favors B over A, whereas the Goldilocks prioritarian favors A over B.

Consider another case. We can choose between policy C and policy D. These are our only choices. Under C, one person is just above the “good enough” threshold and billions of other people lives that are horrific, hellish. They would commit suicide if they could, but they can’t. Under D, the one person who was just over the sufficiency line drops just barely below it, but the billions of hell people find their lives much improved. They are not at the good enough threshold but they have been boosted to have OK lives. Now they would not wish to commit suicide.

In this case the sufficientarian favors C over D, whereas the Goldilocks prioritarian favors D over C.

The prioritarian objects that there is no nonarbitrary way of setting the “good enough” threshold, such that whether persons are at or below the threshold has transcendent importance. Also, the sufficientarian gives insufficient moral weight to the value of helping improve the lives of people who are either unavoidably below threshold or unavoidably above threshold.

Consider in a stylized way the social justice problem of how to deal with disability and severe disability. Disabled persons suffer handicaps that seriously impair their opportunity to achieve valuable lives. Severely disabled persons suffer extreme impairments. We face many social policy issues that involve conflicts of interest between disabled people and more able members of society. (Of course some important social policies affecting disabled people may not involve such conflicts of interest; we ignore these. Also, not all disabled people will be among the worse off or less advantaged people all things considered. A successful physicist who cannot walk may still be leading a great life overall. We confine attention to disabled people who face poor overall quality of life.)

The sufficientarian says that if we can by any effort and at any cost get disabled people to the “good enough” level, this goal trumps all others. The Goldilocks prioritarian disagrees. As the moral cost/benefit ratio of aiding the disabled becomes worse, at some point the prioritarian will switch and consider gaining benefits for others to have higher moral priority all things considered.

If the disabled person is badly off, that is a special reason to provide help to her according to the prioritarian. But if disability makes one a poor transformer of resources into genuine advantages or good quality of life, that is for the prioritarian a reason to channel resources elsewhere, where they do more good. These two effects balance out at some point. (Suppose that we can bring a disabled person to the “good enough” level, but only at tremendous social cost, by paying billions of dollars, say. The prioritarian will say that we need a morally sensitive and sensible cost benefit analysis and that in some cases, regrettably, further aid to the disabled is not morally good policy.

6. Priority attracts objections. In considering these matters, the prioritarian faces an objection that Elizabeth Anderson levels at luck egalitarianism—that its principles fail to “express equal respect and concern for all citizens” (Anderson, p. 289). For example, she thinks any implementation of luck egalitarianism must involve the state in making wrongful and offensive judgments about the comparative worth of individual citizens.

The priority view (at least if one interprets *benefit* or *advantage* as utility) is a cousin of utilitarianism and as such will attract criticisms of utilitarianism. For example, consider Amartya Sen's argument in "Rights and Agency" to the effect that some individual rights should trump utility and that any view that takes utility and its appropriate distribution across persons to be what fundamentally matters from the moral standpoint goes awry in neglecting the fundamental significance of rights.

Consider also Robert Nozick's arguments in chapter 3 of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* for a side constraint conception of morality and against any moral view that countenances violating individual Lockean rights for the greater social good. He writes, "There are only individual people, different individual people, with their own individual lives. Using one of these people for the benefit of others, uses him and benefits the others. Nothing more. . . .Talk on an overall social good covers this up" (p. 33).

From an opposed perspective the utilitarian will criticize priority. Sometimes those who are badly off can get more utility (well-being, happiness, whatever) from a unit of some resource than people who are better off. In those cases the utilitarian recommends favoring the worse off to get more utility. But the prioritarian goes further and believes it is morally more valuable to get a single unit of utility to a worse off person.

7. Priority and individual responsibility. One might now be very well off because one has been extremely conscientiously prudent and managed to achieve a good quality of life despite initial obstacles and disadvantages. In contrast, a person who is now very badly off might have fallen into this predicament through her own nonvirtuous imprudence. As stated, priority attaches no intrinsic moral significance to such differences. We could amend prioritarianism so it adjusts for differential responsibility and irresponsibility.

There are various ways to do this. One is to combine priority with what Dworkin calls a "starting gate" conception of distributive justice. On this view, we adjust people's initial endowments as they enter adult lives and leave the "starting gate" as it were. After that, provided people transact with each other in an environment that lets people contract with others as they wish and not to impose the costs of their behavior on nonconsenting others, no further compensation or adjustment is required or for that matter permitted by social justice, until at the end of life unused assets are taken by the state and reassigned to the a younger generation leaving the starting gate.

Another way to integrate responsibility and priority is to give responsibility direct weight in the calculation that determines what acts and policies would maximize moral value. According to responsibility-catering prioritarianism, acts and

policies should maximize moral value. Moral value is the well-being people achieve, adjusted by two factors: The worse off in absolute terms an individual is, the greater the moral value of securing a benefit for her, and the more responsible an individual is for her present situation, the less the value of gaining a benefit for her (if she is badly off) and the greater the disvalue of causing her loss (if she is well off). Roughly, on this view, the more you smoke over the course of your life, the less it is the case that society is obligated to transfer resources to you to enable you to pay for lung cancer treatment.

In chapter 5 of *a Theory of Justice*, John Rawls dismisses the idea that the just society should be set up to reward the truly deserving. The arguments there, if found acceptable, might sweep away responsibility considerations from playing a fundamental role in principles of justice. One argument is that in a diverse democracy, norms of deservingness and responsibility will be contentious among reasonable persons, so should not figure in the principles that are the basic terms of social cooperation. Another argument is that considerations of desert and responsibility are delicate and hard to discern and so cannot be a basis of feasible operationalizable public policy. "The idea of rewarding desert is impracticable," says Rawls (p. 274). (There are other arguments.) The prioritarian must resist the first line of thought, but not the second. If deservingness and responsibility cannot be measured in public policy contexts, then we must ignore them.

8. Incentives and implementation. Prioritarian moral value will increase in the short run if we transfer resources from well off people to badly off people provided the resources improve the quality of life of the badly off people so that losses of better-offs are more than offset in a moral value calculation by the gains achieved for the badly off. But transfers of resources and other policies that might be instituted to boost prioritarian goals might also have long-run consequences and these might be either favorable or unfavorable according to the prioritarian standard. Policies should be set to maximize moral value over the long haul.

In calculations that determine what we ought to do we do not discount the future just because it lies in the future. (We should discount future consequences to the degree they are uncertain. If we don't have any idea what impact raising or lowering taxes now will have on life 20 years from now, then this unknown impact should be ignored.) Holding people responsible for their choices and actions in various familiar ways can be good strategy for boosting the achievement of the prioritarian goal over the long run even if true desert is undetectable because we cannot see what goes on inside people's souls. It is uncontroversial that responsibility will play an instrumental role in a theory of justice. Among course authors, whether responsibility considerations matter

morally for their own sake, as goals not as means, is an issue that divides John Rawls (who says No) and such authors as Ronald Dworkin and Larry Temkin (who say Yes). The prioritarian and the sufficientarian norms so far as I can see could be developed in either direction. Either view could be responsibility-insensitive or responsibility-sensitive.