

Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, chapter 1

Dworkin versus equality of welfare Dick Arneson.

Dworkin wonders, in so far as we might be for equality, to some degree, what would we be for? He thinks equality is a complex, multi-faceted ideal. One facet is distributional equality. Here the question is, concerning money and other resources to be privately owned by individuals, when is the distribution an equal one? Equality of welfare “holds that a distributional scheme treats people as equals when it distributes or transfers resources among them until no further transfer would leave them more equal in welfare.” Equality of welfare is a utilitarian version of egalitarianism.

This set-up makes it sound as though the question Dworkin is exploring should be of interest only to those antecedently inclined to distributional equality and are wondering what that commitment involves. Those not committed to distributive equality need read no further. But there is a broader question, that Dworkin is exploring. For any theory of social justice that holds that sometimes social policy ought to favor those who are worse off, we need some way of assessing who is better off and who is worse off, so we can tell whom the policy should be favoring. In other words, we might wonder what is the appropriate basis for comparing the condition of individuals for purposes of applying social justice principles. Not all theories of justice need such a basis of interpersonal comparison—Nozick’s does not. But sufficientarians (justice requires that everyone have enough, or be enabled to get enough), prioritarrians (justice requires giving extra moral weight to a gain for a person, the worse off she would otherwise be in lifetime well-being), maximinners of the Rawlsian stripe (make those worst off as well off as possible) all do. Others as well. Dworkin proposes that the appropriate basis for assessing people’s condition for distributional social justice is what others would pay for the resources they control in an ideal market economy (this is the topic of chapter 2).

You might suppose the obvious appropriate basis for comparing people’s condition for distributive justice purposes is the actual quality of life they reach under given distributive arrangements. So how do assess quality of individual life (also known as “welfare,” “utility,” and “well-being”)? Dworkin lays out alternative possibilities. A large part of his argument takes this form: once you see that there are different opposed conceptions of welfare, it turns out no particular conception stays appealing once we begin to work out its implications. Welfare in the abstract might sound like a nice basis for interpersonal comparison but all of the possible particular conceptions of welfare we might choose are objectionable. As it were, having a car sounds like a nice idea, but no brand of car—Chevrolet, Ford, Range Rover, Honda, Toyota, BMW, or any other—looks suitable under scrutiny, so maybe we need an airplane instead, not any kind of car.

This discussion also suggests to Dworkin a master argument against accepting any conception of welfare whatsoever as the principle that determines what count as just distributive arrangements—**the argument from “reasonable regret.”**

The candidate interpretations of the ideal of equality of welfare that Dworkin considers:

1. **Success theories. These come in unrestricted and restricted form.** In an alternate terminology, these are desire satisfaction or life aim fulfillment conceptions of welfare.

The unrestricted forms are no good, so we look to the restricted versions, the most plausible of which is **Personal Success**.

We might interpret equality of personal success as relative success or overall success. The only possibly viable ideal is **equality of overall success**. This is vulnerable to decisive objections. The discussion here is somewhat complex; the example of Jack and Jill is supposed to show the way. In the course of this discussion Dworkin states the master argument, the reasonable regret argument. If sound, this one argument undercuts all welfarist egalitarianism, so Dworkin’s discussion of the alternative types of views is (comparatively) brief.

2. **Hedonistic or quality of experience theories.** These get rejected by Dworkin reasons for reasons somewhat similar to the objection against hedonistic theories of well-being brought out by Robert Nozick's experience machine example (*Anarchy, State and Utopia*, chapter 3).

3. **Objective theories of welfare.** Dworkin is opposed not so much to an objective conception of welfare per se as to the idea incorporating it into a set of principles that all people in a diverse democracy with no agreement of what is ultimately worthwhile in life could accept as principles appropriate for regulating their common life. Dworkin summarizes his worry much later in the book, p. 300: "an objective ranking would be controversial even one with a generous helping of indeterminacy, and basing distribution on such a ranking is not compatible with equal concern for all." Whatever particular conception was chosen, those loyal to other conceptions would reasonably feel unfairly treated: "Why rate my condition for social justice purposes (that purport to say what treatment I am entitled to by the basic institutions of society) according to standards that mean nothing to me, so whether I pass the bar according to these standards or fall short is a "don't care" from my standpoint?" picking any objective standard would be sectarian. A just constitution that rules out a state-established religion rules out a state-established objective principle of human good or well-being by the same token.

Expensive tastes. Dworkin had noted that equality of welfare, even before we commit to any specific conception of it, already seems vulnerable to counterexample such as the problem of expensive tastes and ambitions. "Equality of welfare seems to recommend that those with champagne tastes, who need more income simply to achieve the same level of welfare as those with less expensive tastes, should have more income on that account. But this seems counterintuitive." Does justice demand that those who are satisfied with beer and burgers are entitled to less by way of resources than those satisfied only with champagne and steak? In this section Dworkin considers whether some norm of equality of welfare qualified to avoid the expensive tastes objection might seem more attractive. Dworkin argues that this strategy cannot succeed, because compensation for tastes is at the core of equality of welfare not a peripheral commitment that could be scrapped without scrapping the whole idea.

Handicaps. It might seem that that a welfarist theory handles problems of fair distribution between those with disabilities and those with normal physical and mental endowments in a simple and satisfying way. So the welfarist account of distributional justice for those with handicaps is plausible in a way that enhances the overall appeal of the welfarist approach, even if it does run into some difficulties on other fronts. Dworkin argues that the welfarist account of how to treat people with handicaps is not satisfactory. Moreover, he has an alternative theory up his sleeve, to be unveiled in chapter 2 and subsequent chapters, that handles this problem in a more intuitive and theoretically satisfying fashion.

This quickie summary just records Dworkin's verdicts on the questions raised in this chapter, pretty much skipping over his arguments. So the question becomes: Do Dworkin's arguments succeed—or succeed well enough to make his case?