In chapter 1 of *Sovereign Virtue* Ronald Dworkin argues against the claim that insofar as we care about distributive equality (equality in the distribution of resources to be privately owned), what we should care about is equality of welfare. This says that a distribution of resources in a society is equal just in case it results in all members of society having the same level of welfare (utility, well-being, personal good).

In the chapter Dworkin distinguishes three conceptions of welfare—success or desire satisfaction theories, hedonism or quality of experience views, and objective list accounts. He argues that on none of these interpretations is equality of welfare an attractive social justice ideal.

Although Dworkin does not see the matter this way, one might hold that the arguments for and against one or another conception of welfare are essentially comparative. If the Nozick experience machine example persuades us against the hedonistic/quality of experience views, we are thereby persuaded that the desire satisfaction or objective lists are more plausible than we earlier had thought. If we reject objective list views on the ground there is no nonarbitrary way to say that Smith, who wants to eat rocks for its own sake, not to achieve any further goal, is wrong, that same train of thought enhances the appeal of desire satisfaction views.

Seen in this light, the story of Dworkin’s chapter runs as follows. Unrestricted desire satisfaction views are no good, for the reason Dworkin gives. Among the restricted views, the overall success view is perhaps the best candidate. But it falls to the Jack and Jill counterexample. Jack and Jill are leading lives that look identical in relevant respects to the reasonable observer. What Jack has and achieves that might plausibly be regarded as good, Jill has and achieves an equivalent. What Jack suffers that looks bad, Jill also suffers. They differ only in their (perhaps weird or irrational) philosophical theories about what makes a life good and what the relevant standard of the good life is. Their different philosophical theories lead them to give very different answers to the question, how successful is your life as a whole? One thinks that if you aren’t achieving at the level of Shakespeare, your life is worthless; the other thinks if you are able to eat some cheeseburgers and watch pretty sunsets sometimes, your life is pretty good. So one says her life is going terribly and the other says his life is going great. But this seems a bad ground for declaring that equality justifies transferring resources from the one whose life is going great to the one whose life is going badly by the standard of subjective self-assessment of overall success. My reaction is that if we find what Dworkin says here plausible, we are being given reason to accept an objective list conception of human good—whatever list of objective goods formed our basis for saying Jack’s and Jill’s lives are both going well to the same degree, because they have gained an identical set of items that appear on the Objective List. The moral of the story is that I you have gained a good life, had good friendships, healthy ties to close family members, achievements in
Dworkin’s response to Jack and Jill is quite different. He sees the issue raised by the Jack and Jill story as, what should count as reasonable as opposed to unreasonable regret about how well or badly one’s life has gone. Such judgments must be made against some baseline expectation. I don’t count as having lived a poor life just because I have not lived for 1000 years, nor just because I have not succeeded in running a mile in ten seconds. What is the standard that establishes the line of reasonable regret about how one’s life has gone? Dworkin says that one can reasonably regret one’s life going badly in virtue of one’s not having had a fair share of resources, but not in virtue merely of not having had unlimited resources. But now the cat is out of the bag. We have now brought in the idea of a fair share of resources—but if we already know what counts as a fair share of resources, we have the standard we are supposedly seeking in investigating the notion of equality of welfare. If we already know what counts as a fair distribution of resources, we are wasting our time asking what pattern of welfare induced by a division of resources would make it the case that the distribution was fair. So the idea of reasonable regret spells the doom of the equality of welfare project. We cannot do without the idea of reasonable regret—as entering into any possibly sensible welfare distributive standard, but we cannot do with it either—for reasonable regret contains a barely concealed reference to a fair distribution of resources, which ideal already fills the space we were trying to fill by developing an equality of welfare conception of fair distribution.

This master argument against equality of welfare is resistible. We don’t need the reasonable regret idea to make sense of a welfarist distributive ideal. We appeal to a standard for measuring how well people’s lives are going. Desire satisfaction views are an unsuitable candidate—we agree with Dworkin about this. If the right standard is hedonistic, then the greater the sum of happiness—pleasure minus pain summed over all the moments one has lived—the better one’s life has gone. If a more complex objective list theory is correct, then numbers are attached to levels of objective achievement along the dimensions of life that are significant, and the higher one’s total score of achievement of good, the better one’s life has gone. (Of course, measurement here is rough. A know-it-all perfectionism claims we can get more specific and determinate comparisons for quality of life than we can. But a reasonable objective list or perfectionist view will not be know-it-all.). An egalitarian welfarism says we should tilt, to some degree, in social policy in favor of helping worse-offs rather than better-offs.

Against hedonism or quality of experience conceptions of welfare, Dworkin in effect rehearses Nozick’s experience machine example (chapter 3 of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*). We care about things, and reasonably care about things, other than the quality of our conscious states. If society assessed our condition in terms of a standard (felt happiness) that we don’t care that much about, and adjusts its treatment of us to equalize happiness levels, society is ignoring most of what people reasonably care about. This is
unfair, and especially unfair to those to whom happiness (quality of conscious states or experience) matters less than it does to others. The government (all of us acting together) in basing public policy on hedonistic equality of welfare is failing to show equal concern and respect for all. I have no comment except to note that the more you agree with Dworkin’s objections against desire satisfaction and hedonistic conceptions of welfare, and provided you agree there are no other candidate conceptions except the three he discusses, the more you should agree that the best interpretation of equality of welfare is equality of objective well-being.

But anyway whether equality of welfare is plausible is not really the issue, because, contrary to the way Dworkin sets up the debate, the best conception of distributive justice may not call for equality of anything at all. The issue is not what best fills in the blank in the formula “Equality of ______ should be maintained.” The issue is whether the appropriate measure of people’s condition for a theory of distributive justice that distinguishes people as better off and worse off and demands special consideration for worse off people is welfare on some interpretation of welfare. The alternative is a theory of justice that eschews basing policy on interpersonal comparisons of welfare. Call the alternative views “resourcist.” The objection to any resourcist theory is that what we owe to people depends on what is needed to get people better quality lives with the better quality fairly distributed. An individual should not make a fetish of her resource shares but should be concerned ultimately about what quality of life she gains (and gains for others) via whatever resources are at her disposal in given circumstances. There is no way of determining fair shares of resources except by looking beyond the distribution of resources to see what results for people’s quality of life.

Discussing the issue of distributive justice in its applications to people with disabilities, Dworkin observes correctly that if our standard of justice insisted that all should have the same welfare, then if a disabled person is unavoidably going to lead a far below average quality life, and is a very poor transformer of resources in to well-being gains, the disabled person becomes a basin of attraction for resources. So long as he benefits even just a bit by further infusion of resources, all resources of society become drained toward him, until the average level of well-being plummets to the level of the disabled worse off person. However, this point does not tell against making individual well-being the basis of comparison across persons for purposes of distributive justice. The problems arise here from insisting on strict equality of welfare.

Consider my homeless mentally ill sister-in-law, Jane. Jane’s life has been grim, and absent aid will continue on this trajectory, so there is a strong reason to channel help to her. The idea is roughly that the moral value of getting a one-unit gain in well-being to any individual is greater, the worse off in lifetime well-being the person would be absent this benefit. A benefit to Jane provides stronger reason to aid than a same-sized benefit for Donald Trump or Bill Gates (who we suppose are on the way to leading very good, successful lives). But the moral value of getting a benefit for a person (or avoiding a loss) is also greater, the larger the well-being gain (the smaller the loss) the person would get from the benefit. The egalitarian welfarist idea, which goes by the name “the priority view,” is that the morally right choice of policy and action maximizes the weighted sum
Dworkin has another objection specifically against versions of egalitarian welfarism with *welfare* interpreted according to the objective list idea. The objection appeals to personal responsibility. **Each person has an undelegable responsibility to figure out for herself what is choiceworthy in human life and to fashion a plan of life that pursues good for herself and others according to her own carefully chosen conception.** This responsibility to fashion one’s own plan of life should not be handed over to some other person and should not be handed over to the state either. But if some objective conception of justice becomes part of the public conception of justice for the entire society, that illegitimate handing over of a job of autonomous choice that belongs to each of us is wrongly in play.

A big question is raised here. Lots of issues need sorting out. A simple response is that the responsibility of each person to make her own evaluations and to form a plan of life on their basis does not rule out a back-up responsibility for society in this domain. In one type of social environment, I might be led to make terrible choices and lead a miserable squalid existence, whereas in a different social environment, that we together could have created, I would have made better choices and lived better. Justice according to welfarist egalitarianism requires we create the social environment that is conducive to good lives for people. (This will require wide individual freedom, not social dictatorship or a nanny state, because the latter are not conducive to good lives for people.)

We could restate Dworkin’s point, in a way that shows the affinity of his position here with that of Rawls, whose conception of justice is also resourcist not welfarist. To entrench any particular conception of human good in the publicly enforced conception of justice would be sectarian in just the same way an establishment of religion would be sectarian. The state should be rather impartially neutral between controversial conceptions of good. Response: The state’s policies should be justifiable by reasons we all can share, but that does not rule out enforcing controversial policies on the good any more than it rules out enforcing controversial conceptions of what is right and just. The sectarianism charge would rightly attach to and condemn a policy of establishing a know-it-all perfectionism, but that we should not do anyway.

**Dworkin argues that any version of equality of welfare will require us, as a matter of justice, to compensate people for having expensive tastes, but this would be an absurd policy.** Response: “Expensive tastes” strikes me as not a serious problem for an egalitarian welfarism that affirms an objective well-being standard. If the relevant dimension of human fulfillment is inebriation, beer is as good as champagne. If beer that tastes good gains people just as much well-being as expensive champagne that tastes good, welfarist social policy encourages people to develop cheap tastes. More important, we need to distinguish the level of principle and the level of policy. Our social policies would be counterproductive if they tried to use individual person’s well-being levels to determine what treatment they are accorded. (Imagine a representative from the bureau
of social justice coming to your door, and saying, “Hi Are you very happy or not so happy? If you say you are unhappy, I will write you a big check, and if you say you are very happy, your tax bill goes up.”) The values we fundamentally care about are not operationalizable or administrable directly, so social policy should be guided by the most reliable proxies we can find for what we care about—such matters as infant mortality, literacy rates, provision of good quality schooling, unemployment rates, average income, and so on. Policies geared to advancing social justice goals must also be tailored so that they do not give rise to perverse incentives—motivating people to behave in ways that result in lessened fulfillment of the social justice goals.

Perhaps Dworkin’s central objection to egalitarian welfarism is an appeal to personal responsibility in the following sense. Social justice theory must specify an appropriate division of responsibility between individual and society. There must be a conception of what we owe one another, such that if society has put me in a good enough position, then the job of achieving a good life is from that point on my responsibility, not the proper business of society or the government as agency of society. But egalitarian welfarism cannot respect any appropriate division of responsibility. Suppose society makes arrangements such that I have a fair opportunity to live well if I make good choices, but I continue making bad choices, making a mess of my life. Each time I fall below-par in well-being, an equality of welfare standard picks me out as owed aid by society, to restore equality of welfare (or to move closer to it) across all members of society. Society sets me up, I make choice that bring my life crashing down, society restores me to a path to a good life with roughly the same well-being as others will get, I mess up again, society picks me up and puts me on my feet again, and so on. Equality of welfare seems to require endless intervention in response to problems in my life that should be viewed as my problems not society’s concern.

According to Dworkin equality of welfare in any of its possible forms is incompatible with a proper and reasonable drawing of the line in social justice theory between what is the individual’s responsibility for her own life and what is the responsibility of society for that same individual’s life and how it goes.

There are several ways in which an egalitarian welfarism might be formulated to meet this objection. One possibility is to say what each of us is owed is not some guarantee of any welfare outcome but rather a fair opportunity to gain a good, fulfilling life. (If we were strict egalitarians we might hold that justice requires equal opportunity for welfare.) another possibility appeals to a weaker construal of the equality idea in egalitarianism. The prioritarian holds that morality requires balancing the goals of bringing about more total well-being and bringing about more well-being for the worse off. At some point in the cycle described in the previous paragraph, the prioritarian principles will say “enough.” Society has done enough for the individual. A third possibility is that we add a third component to the priority view, so that besides holding it is intrinsically morally valuable to give priority to the worse off, it is also intrinsically morally desirable to give priority to the more deserving (the saints rather than the sinners, the virtuous not the vicious). Adding such a deservingness component to welfarist egalitarianism will make it more forgiving to some people who keep messing up their lives (they are doing as well as could reasonably be expected, it’s not really their fault) and less forgiving to others.
(you have messed up and it’s your fault). In a spirit reminiscent of Victorian social policy, desert-catering welfarist egalitarianism tries to separate the undeserving and the deserving poor (and also the deserving and the undeserving rich) and accord different treatment to each group.

**In chapter 6 of *Sovereign Virtue* Dworkin revisits the issue** of how the theory of the good life connects to the theory of social justice. He pursues an interesting line: When we think through what is really worthwhile and worth seeking in human life, what really makes a life go better rather than worse, we find more agreement on the nature of the good, at a certain level of abstraction, than one might have supposed. But our convictions about the good life thought through seriously should strengthen rather than weaken our commitment to resourcist justice and specifically to Dworkinian equality of resources.