

# *Egalitarianism and the Levelling Down Objection*

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In an important piece of work Derek Parfit distinguishes two different forms of egalitarianism, 'Deontic' and 'Telic' (Parfit 1995; see also Parfit 1997). He contrasts these with what he calls the Priority View, which is not strictly a form of egalitarianism at all, since it is not essentially concerned with how well off people are relative to each other. His main aim is to generate an adequate taxonomy of the positions available, but in the process he draws attention to some of the different problems they face. I shall argue that there are forms of egalitarianism overlooked by Parfit which avoid the problems encountered by Deontic and Telic Egalitarians.

## *1. Equality and intrinsic value*

Telic Egalitarians accept what Parfit calls the Principle of Equality, namely, that it is in itself bad if some people are worse off than others. Deontic Egalitarians, in contrast, do not endorse this Principle. When they object to inequality, they do so on the grounds that it is unjust or involves wrongdoing, not because it is intrinsically bad (Parfit 1995: 4, 8–9).

Parfit argues that the distinction between Telic and Deontic Egalitarianism is of crucial importance, mainly for the reason that Telic Egalitarianism is vulnerable to what he calls the Levelling Down Objection while Deontic Egalitarianism can avoid it altogether (Parfit 1995: 16–18). The Levelling Down Objection starts from the observation that in principle equality could be brought about by reducing the better off to the condition of the worst off, thereby making some worse off and none better off. For example, equality of vision between the blind and the sighted could be created by destroying the eyes of the sighted. The Levelling Down Objection maintains that, other things being equal, this would not in any respect constitute an improvement. Deontic egalitarians, unlike Telic, can escape this objection because they can maintain that 'we have a reason to remove inequality only *when*, and only *because*, our way of doing so benefits the people who are worse off' (Parfit 1995: 18).

Parfit argues that, although Deontic Egalitarianism can evade the Levelling Down Objection, it may lack the resources to object to kinds of inequality which many egalitarians have found troubling, for example, inequalities that are not humanly produced, or inequalities that obtain between members of different communities which are not the product of wrongdoing of any kind (Parfit 1995: 18–19). Some egalitarians have been

especially disturbed by the vast inequalities that obtain across the globe, yet Deontic Egalitarians are hard pressed to explain what is objectionable about them.

In order to illustrate this point, consider an influential form of Deontic Egalitarianism that Parfit mentions. This contractarian version maintains that when goods are cooperatively produced, the contributors should receive equal shares unless any of them have special claims (Parfit 1995: 13–14). It therefore has no basis for objecting to inequalities unless a case can be made that the people between whom they obtain are engaged in some appropriate cooperative venture. So if we are unable to justify the idea that the inhabitants of the world are engaged in such an enterprise, there will be inequalities, perhaps vast, to which this form of Deontic Egalitarianism can offer no objection.

Partly because Deontic Egalitarianism (at least in its most common variants) has difficulty explaining what is wrong about inequalities that are not humanly produced, or which obtain between members of different communities, Parfit thinks that it is important to distinguish egalitarianism of both kinds from the Priority View, which maintains that benefiting people matters more the worse off those people are, whilst (like Deontic Egalitarianism) denying that equality possesses any intrinsic value (Parfit 1995: 19–20). The Priority View does not face the Levelling Down Objection but has the resources to explain what is objectionable about lack of concern for the worst off even when the worst off do not belong to any of the same communities as the better off.

Parfit's distinctions are illuminating. In my view, however, they mask the possibility of two other forms of egalitarianism which avoid the Levelling Down Objection. The positions I have in mind also possess the resources to explain what is bad about inequalities between those who do not share community membership. In order to identify these positions, a distinction needs to be drawn between non-instrumental value and intrinsic value. Parfit, like many others, often appears to use the term 'intrinsic value' to mean non-instrumental value, but a distinction can be made between them.

When something has non-instrumental value it has value for its own sake, whereas when it has instrumental value it has value as a means to something else. (I shall use the expressions 'non-instrumentally valuable' and 'valuable for its own sake' interchangeably.) As Christine Korsgaard argues, however, there is a different distinction that also needs to be drawn between two other kinds of value, best marked by the terms 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' (Korsgaard 1996: 250–53). Exactly how this distinction should be characterized is not an easy matter, but for my purposes the following will suffice. The intrinsic value of a thing is any value it possesses that is grounded entirely in its intrinsic properties, where its intrinsic properties

are those which do not depend, even in part, on the existence or nature of something else. In contrast, the extrinsic value of a thing is any value it possesses that is not grounded wholly in its intrinsic properties. These two distinctions (between instrumental and non-instrumental value on the one hand, and intrinsic and extrinsic value on the other) do not always coincide: for example, it is possible to hold that something has extrinsic value because it is rare or unusual but is non-instrumentally valuable partly in virtue of its rarity or unusualness.

What is the relevance of these distinctions to the question of whether egalitarians can avoid the Levelling Down Objection? Making these distinctions allows us to identify the possibility of two forms of egalitarianism neglected by Parfit, which are variants of what I shall call Conditional Egalitarianism. The first of these positions, which I shall refer to as CE<sub>1</sub>, holds that equality is *extrinsically but non-instrumentally* valuable. According to CE<sub>1</sub>, equality is extrinsically valuable because it is valuable for its own sake only when at least some people benefit from it; when this condition is met its non-instrumental value is partly grounded in its benefiting some.

Whether some people benefit from equality is to be determined by considering other empirically possible states of affairs, in order to see whether there is one in which everyone is better off than they would be under equality or in which some are better off and none worse off. According to CE<sub>1</sub>, equality is non-instrumentally valuable if and only if there are no such states of affairs. When some benefit from equality, we should value it for its own sake even though its value is partly grounded in its benefiting some. If no one benefits from equality, then it lacks non-instrumental value.

Some might object that, if the value of equality is partly grounded in its benefiting some, it is not strictly speaking valuable for its own sake. Perhaps this objection merely shows that in ordinary usage 'non-instrumentally valuable' and 'valuable for its own sake' are not synonymous despite my practice of using them interchangeably. For there does not seem to be any pressure to insist that if the value of a thing is partly grounded in the meeting of some other condition, then it cannot be non-instrumentally valuable. (If there is a deeper problem here, defenders of CE<sub>1</sub> might in any case move to the position that equality is a constituent of a good that is valuable for its own sake. Here G. E. Moore's work on organic wholes, which I discuss in §3, would be relevant.)

According to the second version of Conditional Egalitarianism, which I shall refer to as CE<sub>2</sub>, equality is *intrinsically and non-instrumentally* valuable but only when it benefits at least some.<sup>1</sup> When equality benefits

<sup>1</sup> I came to see the possibility of such a position as a result of reading Jonathan Dancy's work on intrinsic value: see Dancy 1999: 145–46; Dancy forthcoming.

no one, it lacks both intrinsic and non-instrumental value. CE<sub>2</sub> might seem incoherent. Surely if equality is intrinsically valuable on some occasions, then it must be intrinsically valuable whenever it obtains?

This does indeed follow on some conceptions of intrinsic value, such as G. E. Moore's. It is partly this idea that motivates his 'method of isolation', which supposes that the intrinsic value of a thing can be understood as the value it would possess if it were absolutely by itself (Moore 1993 (1903): 145). According to the account of intrinsic value I have been employing, however, the intrinsic value of a thing is any value it possesses that is grounded in its intrinsic properties. That does not rule out the possibility that something may be of intrinsic value in one context but not in another. For the intrinsic value of a thing may be affected by the context in which it appears, and therefore vary from one context to another, but in each context its value may nevertheless be grounded entirely in its intrinsic properties.

In clarifying what is at stake here, we may follow Jonathan Dancy in distinguishing between the grounds for the value of an object in some context and the features which enable it to possess that value in this context (Dancy 1999: 145–46; Dancy forthcoming). The former are the characteristics which make the thing valuable when it is so, whereas the latter are the features which must be present before these characteristics can make it valuable. CE<sub>2</sub> in effect maintains that equality is valuable for its own sake only in the presence of an enabling feature, namely, its benefiting some; when this enabling feature is present, its value is grounded entirely in the intrinsic properties of equality.

How do these versions of Conditional Egalitarianism fit into Parfit's taxonomy? Neither fits very well; indeed they seem to cut across his distinction between Deontic and Telic Egalitarianism. CE<sub>1</sub> appears at first to be a relative of Telic Egalitarianism, because it maintains that equality is sometimes non-instrumentally valuable. But it cannot be a form of Telic Egalitarianism if (as appears to be the case) it is committed to rejecting the Principle of Equality that is partially constitutive of Telic Egalitarianism. (This Principle appears to attribute intrinsic value to equality, for it maintains that it is in itself bad if some people are worse off than others, whereas CE<sub>1</sub> denies that equality has intrinsic value.) CE<sub>2</sub> also appears at first to be a relative of Telic Egalitarianism, for it maintains that equality is sometimes intrinsically valuable. But it cannot be a form of Telic Egalitarianism, since it rejects the claim which appears to be implicit in the Principle of Equality that equality *always* has intrinsic value.

Both CE<sub>1</sub> and CE<sub>2</sub> manage to avoid the Levelling Down Objection, for that objection relies on the claim that levelling down cannot, other things being equal, constitute an improvement in any respect. CE<sub>1</sub> and CE<sub>2</sub> agree with this claim. At the same time they can object to inequalities between

those who do not belong to the same community even when they are not humanly produced nor the products of wrongdoing, and hence can avoid the potential problem faced by forms of Deontic Egalitarianism in accommodating the idea that such inequalities are objectionable.

## 2. *Conditional Egalitarianism and transitivity*

In judging whether equality is non-instrumentally valuable in a particular situation both variants of Conditional Egalitarianism will require us to examine whether some benefit from equality, which will require us to explore whether there are other empirically possible states of affairs in which everyone is better off or in which some are better off and none worse off. In this sense judgements about the value of equality are ‘essentially comparative’.

Larry Temkin argues that if judgements concerning whether one outcome is better (or worse) with regard to equality are essentially comparative, then they will not be transitive. He considers a person-affecting form of egalitarianism according to which ‘concern about inequality is not merely concern that inequality be removed, but that it be removed in a certain way, so as to benefit those worse off’ (Temkin 1987: 171). This position entails that judgements concerning whether an outcome is better or worse with regard to equality will be non-transitive. Temkin gives the following example to illustrate the way in which transitivity can fail. From the standpoint of person-affecting forms of egalitarianism, an outcome in which all are sighted is better with regard to equality than an outcome in which some are sighted and some are blind, and this in turn is better than an outcome in which all are blind. But, Temkin argues, it does not follow that an outcome in which all are sighted is better with regard to equality than an outcome in which all are blind; these are equivalent regarding equality (Temkin 1987: 171, n. 37).

Even though both  $CE_1$  and  $CE_2$  resemble person-affecting forms of egalitarianism, Temkin’s example does not show that they generate intransitive judgements. For  $CE_1$  and  $CE_2$  license the conclusion that, where the alternatives are an outcome in which all are sighted and one in which all are blind, the former is better than the latter even with regard to equality. For these views insist that equality is valuable for its own sake only when it benefits some, and equality of blindness benefits no one.

There are cases, however, in which  $CE_1$  and  $CE_2$  do seem to generate intransitive judgements concerning whether outcomes are better or worse with regard to equality. Consider the following artificial example, which consists of a sequence of outcomes A, B, C, and D, involving the same set of people. In each outcome, these people are equally well off, but they become progressively better off as we move from A to D. The following

comparative judgements can be made. When B obtains, if the only possible move is to A, then B has more value than A with regard to equality, for the equality in A has no value since it benefits no one. When C obtains, if the only possible move is to B, then C has more value than B with regard to equality, since the equality in B has no value since it benefits no one. If such judgements were transitive, then it would follow that, with regard to equality, C has more value than A. That will not be the case, however, in circumstances when C obtains but it is possible to move to either D or A. For under these circumstances the equality in C will have no value, since it benefits no one, and the same will be true of the equality in A; C and A will then have equal value with regard to equality.

### 3. *Intuitions and organic wholes*

How might either CE<sub>1</sub> or CE<sub>2</sub> be defended? In deciding between them, further clarification of the notions of ‘intrinsic value’ and ‘valuing something for its own sake’ would be of crucial importance. For my purposes in this article, however, what they share in common as variants of Conditional Egalitarianism is more significant, namely, the idea that equality possesses non-instrumental value only when it benefits at least some, for it is this idea which enables them to avoid the Levelling Down Objection. In defending the idea that equality is non-instrumentally valuable only when it benefits some people, intuitions will play a crucial role.

Intuitions have no special epistemological status; they are merely beliefs. I cannot here defend the general practice of appealing to intuitions in the course of moral argument. Note, however, that the Levelling Down Objection itself ultimately rests on an intuition, namely, the intuition that, other things being equal, equality cannot be good when it is good for no one. Some might try to defend this intuition by advancing the *general* thesis that something cannot be good if it is good for no one. But, I would contend, this thesis is plausible only to the extent that it at least roughly fits the shape of our particular judgements about what is valuable (see Temkin 1993: 245–82).

Appealing to intuitions in the context of arguing for conclusions about intrinsic value is not unusual. Compare Joseph Raz’s claim that an autonomous act possesses value in virtue of being autonomous only when the act is itself good, on the grounds that our intuitions rebel against the thought that an autonomous act possesses some value in virtue of being autonomous even when the act is immoral (Raz 1986: 380). Or consider the claim that pleasure has non-instrumental value but not when it arises from the performance or contemplation of an immoral action, a claim which can be defended only by appeal to intuitions (Dancy 1993: 56, 61).

The versions of Conditional Egalitarianism I have distinguished might be regarded as counter-intuitive in some respects, however. They both regard equality as non-instrumentally valuable even when the alternative is an inequality which would make all but one individual massively better off and that individual only marginally worse off. But here a further distinction Parfit draws between Pure Egalitarianism and Pluralist Egalitarianism can do some work (Parfit 1995: 4). Pure Egalitarians care only about equality, whereas Pluralist Egalitarians care about both equality and utility. The latter can regard a state of affairs in which equality obtains as worse, all things considered, than one where there is inequality but all but one are massively better off.

Appealing to this distinction does not help Telic Egalitarians give a convincing response to the Levelling Down Objection, for it is implausible to suppose that, other things being equal, a state of affairs in which everyone is equally destitute is better in even one respect than a state of affairs in which some are in this condition and others are better off.<sup>2</sup> But the distinction can be used more successfully in defending CE<sub>1</sub> and CE<sub>2</sub> against the objection I have outlined. For it is not implausible to suppose that when there are two possible states of affairs, one where a single individual benefits from equality and one where all except him benefit from inequality, then the former is better in one respect than the latter.

This point might be elaborated further using G. E. Moore's notion of an organic whole. In Moore's account a complex whole made up of a number of different elements in relation may possess intrinsic value. The value of such a whole bears no simple relationship to the value of its constituents considered in isolation:

It is certain that a good thing may exist in such a relation to another good thing that the value of the whole thus formed is immensely greater than the sum of the values of the two good things. It is certain that a whole formed of a good thing and an indifferent thing may have immensely greater value than that good thing itself possesses ... *The value of a whole must not be assumed to be the same as the sum of the values of its parts.* (Moore 1993 (1903): 79)

Employing this notion, we might say that the organic whole formed by 'equality' and 'some deriving benefit from that state of affairs' is intrinsically valuable, whereas the organic whole formed by 'equality' but 'no one deriving benefit from that state of affairs' lacks any intrinsic value. In the circumstances where equality would marginally benefit just one individual but inequality would make everyone but him massively better off, the value

<sup>2</sup> But see Temkin 1993: 282 for a different view.

of the organic whole involving inequality and the benefit many derive from it is greater than the value of the organic whole involving equality and the benefit one person derives from it.

In keeping with his conception of intrinsic value, Moore insists that the intrinsic value of the constituent parts that make up an organic whole does not vary; the value of the whole is explained by the way in which these parts are related to each other in the whole:

The part of a valuable whole retains exactly the same value when it is, as when it is not, a part of that whole. If it had value under other circumstances, its value is not any greater, when it is part of a far more valuable whole; and if it had no value by itself, it has none still, however great be that of the whole of which it now forms a part. (Moore 1993 (1903): 81)

I have suggested, however, that there is nothing incoherent in the idea that the intrinsic value of a thing may be affected by the context in which it appears, provided its intrinsic value is characterized as any value it possesses that is grounded entirely in its intrinsic properties. This conception of intrinsic value allows that the intrinsic value of a thing may vary from one context to another, provided that in each context its value is nevertheless grounded in its intrinsic properties.

Let us now return to the case where equality would marginally benefit just one individual. Defenders of CE<sub>2</sub> have a further point they can make in relation to this case. They can say that in this case the value of the *equality* in the complex whole involving ‘equality’ and ‘some deriving benefit from it’ is small; that equality may have much greater value in other wholes when, say, a greater number of individuals derive benefit from it; that it has no value in wholes which involve no one deriving benefit from it. In other words, the value of equality when it benefits some people may vary depending on what benefits could be secured by inequality, even though its non-instrumental value is not grounded in its benefiting them.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have identified two potential forms of egalitarianism that cannot be captured adequately by Parfit’s distinction between Deontic and Telic Egalitarianism. According to the first form of Conditional Egalitarianism, equality is extrinsically valuable. It is non-instrumentally valuable only when it benefits some. When this condition is met, it is valuable for its own sake, even though its value is grounded partly in its benefiting some. According to the second form, equality is intrinsically valuable but only when it benefits some. When it benefits some, its non-



instrumental value is grounded entirely in the intrinsic properties of equality.<sup>3</sup>

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