

# UNDERSTANDING EGALITARIANISM

**DENNIS MCKERLIE**

*University of Calgary*

---

The paper considers some differences in the ways that economics and philosophy study equality and egalitarianism in general. First, economics tends to understand a value simply as an ordering over outcomes while philosophy attempts to find a deeper explanation of the ordering in terms of intuitive ideas about the value. Sometimes the supposedly deeper explanation turns out to be insightful, but, in other cases, it is misleading or fails to be explanatory. Second, economists often propose impossibility results intended to show that apparently innocuous ideas about a value can have surprising consequences when they are combined. However, the significance of the results can be difficult to interpret and, sometimes, they do not establish as much as they initially seem to. Third, economists often criticize philosophical work about equality for making misguided assumptions about the possibility of measuring utility or well-being. The paper does not attempt to answer this criticism, but it points out some specific ways in which the scepticism about measurement might be exaggerated.

## INTRODUCTION

Bertil Tungodden's interesting and ambitious paper is a good starting point for thinking about the ways in which moral philosophy and economics study equality, and egalitarianism in general.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that his paper is primarily about method. It argues for substantive conclusions about how the values of equality and priority for the badly off should be understood and weighed against other moral principles. Although Tungodden is an economist, I think most of his readers would agree that in this essay he is practising moral philosophy rather than economics.

My comments will concern both Tungodden's suggestions about the relationship between the two disciplines and his proposals about egalitarianism. They will involve some unsupported generalizing on my part about the economic approach to these issues. I hope that this will

<sup>1</sup> Tungodden (2003). Subsequent references to this paper will be incorporated in the text.

seem less objectionable if I say in advance that it is not an attempt to unfavourably contrast economics with philosophy. Like Tungodden, I believe that there are real differences between the disciplines. When we have noticed them, it is not easy to decide whether one method is superior to the other.

Section 1 discusses a difference between the disciplines over the form that an account of a moral value should take. Section 2 is about a particular kind of argument that is often used by economists to determine the specific content of a value. Section 3 considers the priority view. Section 4 discusses measurement and the view held by some economists that limitations on the possibility of measurement undermine philosophical accounts of equality and priority.

### 1.

The first difference lies in what might be called the depth of the explanation that is being sought. When discussing a value, moral philosophers are typically concerned to relate the value to what they take to be intuitive ideas about it. Even those philosophers who end by interpreting the moral notion in a way that is radically different from how it is understood by common-sense morality give some importance to this procedure. Moral philosophers would contend that relating the value to intuitive moral judgements is at least part of what it means to give an account of the value.

The thought behind this method is partly that the intuitive ideas give us some reason to suppose that the value is a defensible one. If we can connect the value to moral judgements that most of us would confidently make, we have provided a kind of rational support for the value. To make the case in terms of explanation rather than justification, some of the intuitive ideas might reveal what is most fundamental about the value. For example, some moral philosophers think it is an intuitive idea about rights that they should be concerned with freedom rather than well-being. These intuitive ideas will guide us in defining the value and in formulating an explicit principle with sufficient exactness to allow us to choose between the different possible outcomes that the value might be applied to.

My impression is that economists are much less inclined to work in this way. They are more likely to think that what is important in understanding a value like equality is simply converting that value into an ordering over outcomes. Presumably their view is that this is the level at which we find genuine clarity. They suppose that so-called intuitive ideas about equality are not necessarily helpful in arriving at this ordering, or in understanding why that ordering might be better than different orderings of the same outcomes produced by different values. Also, some economists accept

the view that it is unreasonable to give weight to our intuitive moral judgements, unless we have in some way first proved that they are reliable.

I think that some of Tungodden's comments about priority show that he shares my impression that there is some such difference between the disciplines. He criticizes economic writers for not paying more attention to what he thinks of as the intuitions behind the view that we should give priority to helping those who are badly off. He suggests that, as a result, economists have missed some valuable clues to understanding priority and to seeing how it differs from equality. Tungodden emphasizes one point that he thinks economists have missed, the usefulness of the idea of priority as opposed to equality in capturing the intuitive view that there is some absolute level of quality of life such that it is especially urgent to help those who are below that level (pp. 25–8).

Nevertheless, economists would not readily admit that the absence of this feature in their own method is a defect. They would argue that in many cases the intuitive notions used by philosophers obscure the issues, either because the supposedly deeper level being appealed to is not genuinely explanatory, or because the ideas being invoked are less than clear, or because the intuitive notions do not in fact lead us to the best and most general formulation of the relevant moral principle.

For example, in the case of priority, economists might question the usefulness of explaining the value by saying "a benefit has special value if it is received by someone who is badly off, just because that person is badly off". This explanation may seem intuitive, but it suggests that the principle only applies to cases where we assign some benefit to a person who is antecedently worse off than others. However, arguably the very same value would apply to cases where we are choosing between bringing about outcomes that would contain completely different people. A prioritarian might prefer to bring about an outcome containing three individuals at levels of well-being 5, 8 and 9 rather than an outcome containing three different people at levels 4, 9 and 10, even though choosing the first outcome does not help any individual who was antecedently worse off than others. If we attach special importance to helping a person who is at an especially low level of absolute well-being, presumably we should also attach special importance to avoiding outcomes that contain individuals at that low level of well-being. The "intuitive" explanation that I began with conceals this implication of the value.<sup>2</sup>

In his positive account of equality Tungodden himself aims at a very deep level of explanation. He suggests that the concern for equality in well-being between different people depends on and derives from a deeper notion of moral equality (p. 4). This proposal seems to have some important consequences for his general view of egalitarianism. For example, it helps

<sup>2</sup> This point was brought to my attention by John Roemer.

to determine how the principle of equality should be weighed against other moral principles. According to Tungodden, the principle of personal good (which is more or less equivalent to Pareto optimality) counts as a better expression of the moral equality of people than the concern that different people should enjoy equal levels of well-being, so the former principle should outweigh the principle of equality when the two principles conflict (p. 10). As a result the combination of principles that Tungodden holds would never recommend what is usually called “levelling down”.

In my view, this is attempting to find too deep a basis for egalitarianism. I do not think that basing the concern for equality of well-being on the moral equality of people is genuinely explanatory. I believe myself that saying that accepting a requirement of equality of well-being is the appropriate way of respecting the more basic moral equality of people is just another way of asserting that people do have a claim to equality in well-being, not a way of justifying or explaining that assertion. For it to count as a justification we would first need an independent explanation of what moral equality is (an explanation that is independent of the principle of equality in well-being itself), and then an explanation of why moral equality understood in that way does require equality of well-being.<sup>3</sup>

Since I think the notion of moral equality is not explanatory, I do not agree that we can use it to assess the relative importance of the principle of personal good and the principle of literal equality in well-being. For example, Tungodden may be right that whenever the principle of personal good and the principle of equality of well-being conflict, we should follow the former principle. However, I do not think the idea of moral equality explains why this conclusion is the right one to draw. Suppose that we disagree with Tungodden and prefer an outcome in which A is at 3 and B is at 3 to an outcome in which A is at 4 and B is at 6. This preference may be unreasonable and mistaken, but it is not wrong because it fails to treat A and B as moral equals.

The problem of insisting on a deep level of explanation that turns out to be non-explanatory is more characteristic of moral philosophy than economics.<sup>4</sup> However, we should not correct for it by refusing to

<sup>3</sup> Tungodden is not alone in trying to derive a substantive principle of equality in distribution from some more abstract notion of equality. Ronald Dworkin has contended that the basic idea in egalitarianism is that of treating people as equals, and that a principle that requires providing people with equal shares of resources turns out to be the best concrete interpretation of the general notion of treating people as equals. See Dworkin (2000, Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2). I have the same concern about Dworkin’s position. He does not offer an explicit argument that explains why equality in resources is the best interpretation of treating people as equals. We may find Dworkin’s distributive principle very appealing, but that is not the same thing as deriving from a more fundamental idea.

<sup>4</sup> There is another problem with some “deeper” explanations of a value. Sometimes the proposed explanation is substantive, but it fails to generate the content that we believe

move beyond the level of orderings over outcomes, which creates the opposite problem in the way some economists study values. The emphasis on understanding a value as an ordering over outcomes may help to explain why some economists question whether there really is a significant difference between the values of equality and priority. Suppose that we start from a particular version of prioritarianism – a view that assigns a specific extra weight to benefits for people who are badly off. Taking it as our model, it might be possible to design an interpretation of equality that would generate the same choices between outcomes. In my opinion, this would not show that the distinction between equality and priority collapses. That reading of equality might be extremely implausible as an account of how we actually understand the value of equality. It might match our all things considered judgements about which outcomes are better than others, but fail to match our intuitive judgements of how much inequality there is in an outcome, and how bad that inequality is. I suspect that this is true of interpretations of equality that make it equivalent to the maximin view. Our hope must be that there is a level between the two extremes where we can find helpful explanations that do not amount to changing the subject.

## 2.

Another difference between the disciplines concerns what might be called the possibilities for argument about values like equality. Here, at least in one specific way, economics might be more ambitious than moral philosophy.

Economists – not that they are unique in this respect – notice that ideas and principles often have consequences that are not intuitively obvious and come as surprises when they are discovered. The likelihood of unexpected results increases when we are dealing with several principles rather than just one. Economists often focus on the surprising mutual incompatibility of ideas which intuitively seemed, if not strongly unified, at least far from being in tension with one another. They produce so-called impossibility proofs or theorems, several of which have deservedly received a great deal of attention in both economics and moral philosophy.

It is not that philosophers are blind to such possibilities. However, sometimes the incompatibility can only be revealed by using certain formal procedures, and moral philosophers are not always used to thinking about values in those ways. Also, philosophers are more inclined to give weight

the value has. Although I cannot argue the point here, I believe that this will turn out to be true of attempts to explain equality or priority in terms of unanimity or agreement between different people. If we start from that fundamental idea we will not arrive at a principle that is plausible as a principle of equality or priority.

to intuitively persuasive ideas (Section I) and, when faced with a group of reasonable-seeming views about equality, they are less inclined to suspect that there might be a problem of principle with combining them.

Tungodden uses a particular impossibility result in specifying the content of the principle of equality (pp. 13–15).<sup>5</sup> It leads to his conclusion that the principle should be partially identified with the leximin principle or the maximin principle (the need for the qualification “partially” will be explained later), a conclusion that he concedes is to some extent counter-intuitive. While I am not questioning the cogency of the proof itself, I think there is a question about the significance of what it actually shows, as is sometimes the case with such theorems. I am not convinced that it does give us a compelling reason to interpret the principle of equality along the lines of leximin or maximin.

The result comes from combining the principle of equality with the principle of personal good and with a restriction on equality proposed by Peter Vallentyne.<sup>6</sup> The restriction states that if we reduce the well-being of the best-off person in an outcome and increase the well-being of the worst-off person, without changing their status as best-off and worse-off respectively and without changing the level of well-being of any other individual in the outcome, then the resulting outcome will be better in terms of equality than the original outcome. This restriction seems innocuous in the sense that it apparently would be accepted by most egalitarians, whatever else they might think about the best way of specifying the content of the principle of equality itself.

Tungodden argues that if we also suppose that the principle of equality wins when it conflicts with other principles, it will turn out that the only interpretation of equality compatible with all of these conditions reads the principle of equality as equivalent to maximin or leximin. If I understand Tungodden’s view correctly, he only advocates identifying the principle of equality with maximin in choices where there is genuine conflict between people’s interests – that is, when the outcome that would be best for the worst-off person would be worse than some alternative outcome for someone else. He does not think the identification holds in choices where there is no fundamental conflict and the principle of personal good applies – that is, where there is an outcome that is better than the alternatives for at least some people while not being worse than the alternatives for anyone.

Tungodden’s argument also assumes that the relation of being “better all things considered than” holding between outcomes is transitive. So one response to the argument involves denying transitivity, and some

<sup>5</sup> My discussion is also partly based on the more formal presentation of the result in Tungodden (2000).

<sup>6</sup> See Vallentyne (2000).

egalitarians would be willing to do that.<sup>7</sup> However, this is a radical response, and even if we think there are reasons for questioning transitivity we might be surprised if we were required to do this in order to escape Tungodden's conclusion.

A second reply would question Vallentyne's restriction. Certainly, if we think that the condition is intended to specify a sufficient condition for one outcome to be better all things considered than some other outcome it is obviously questionable. However, the restriction does seem persuasive if it is applied to equality specifically. This means treating it as a condition for one outcome to be better than another with respect to equality but not necessarily better all things considered.

I think that the most interesting response to the theorem questions the condition that the principle of equality should outweigh other moral principles when it conflicts with them (again Tungodden presumably sees this condition as applying only to cases of conflict where helping the worst off will lower the well-being of others, not to cases that fall under the principle of personal good). For one thing, I think there are reasons independent of the issues at stake in Tungodden's theorem for thinking that equality can sometimes be outweighed by other values. More importantly, the reader will realize that when this condition is added to the argument it strengthens Vallentyne's restriction into a principle that does generate all things considered rankings of outcomes whenever it applies. It means that whenever the restriction says that outcome A is better than outcome B with respect to equality we must go on to draw the stronger conclusion that A is simply better than B all things considered. This is important for the success of Tungodden's argument.

Consider the outcomes  $x = (1, 10, 10)$ ,  $y = (2, 2, 2)$ , and  $z = (3, 9, 1000)$ .<sup>8</sup> By the principle of personal good  $z$  is better than  $y$ . By equality,  $y$  is better than  $x$ . If we understand the principle of equality in a supposedly intuitive way (that is, as not being the same as maximin)  $x$  might well seem better than  $z$  with respect to equality. So, apparently, the result will be intransitivity. However, we only arrive at this result by assuming that the principle of equality leads to an all things considered ranking of these outcomes. Without that assumption it is not clear where intransitivity would come from. And the more modest judgements that  $y$  is better than  $x$  at least with respect to equality and  $x$  is better than  $z$  at least with respect to equality seem reasonable in themselves.

As I have said, Tungodden only interprets the principle of equality as maximin in cases where people's interests conflict. Suppose we are

<sup>7</sup> Larry Temkin might be an example. He takes seriously the possibility that some of our important moral judgements might involve intransitivity in Temkin (1987).

<sup>8</sup> I owe this example, and the insight that it is relevant to Tungodden's position, to Marc Fleurbaey.

choosing between the outcomes a (3, 3) and b (4, 6). Here there is no conflict and the principle of personal good applies, so Tungodden concludes that the second outcome is all things considered better than the first. However, he also supposes that the principle of equality will say that in this case a is better than b with respect to equality, although it is worse all things considered. That judgement is indeed intuitively appealing, but it could not be made by someone who interpreted equality as maximin in every case. Of course, that is not Tungodden's view, but he does not explain why the principle of equality should take such different forms depending on the kind of example we apply it to. If equality is distinct from the maximin principle in this case, why should they coincide in cases where there are conflicts between people's interests?<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps we can draw a more general moral about interpreting impossibility results. The conditions that are used to produce the result may be in themselves reasonable. Vallentyne's restriction is at least persuasive treated as a point about equality. The principle of personal good is virtually taken for granted by many people, although others are willing to question it. Some egalitarians are so-called "strong" egalitarians in that they do want to say that the principle of equality should outweigh other principles and values. And when all of these conditions are put together they may lead to the result that the theorem claims.

However, what remains problematic is using this result to determine the content of one particular moral value that is part of the proof, in this case the value of equality. Some of the conditions (e.g., Vallentyne's restriction) might express insights about the nature of that particular value. Other conditions – for example, the principle of personal good – might be reasonable in themselves, but not especially related to equality. Those conditions are presumably imposed for reasons not having to do with equality. In such a case I think there is a reason to be cautious about using the collective results of all of these conditions to determine the content of the principle of equality specifically.

<sup>9</sup> In offering an intuitive defence of his interpretation of equality, Tungodden compares outcome x {2, 10, 100} to outcome y {1, 100, 100} (p. 13). He says that many people will feel that there is more inequality in x but it is arguable – as the maximin interpretation requires – that there is more inequality in y because of the isolation of the worst-off person in y. I think that the persuasiveness of his suggestion depends on supposing that there is one person at each of the three levels in both outcomes. Suppose, instead, that there is one person at the lowest level in both outcomes while there are 1,000,000 people at each of the other two levels in both outcomes. Now the worst-off person in y is even more isolated, but it is hard to resist the conclusion that x contains more inequality. In y everyone – almost! – is perfectly equal, but the same cannot be said of x. Since the maximin interpretation does not give weight to numbers, the revised example is a fair test of its claim to represent the content of equality.



## 3.

Tungodden's paper contains an interesting discussion of the priority view or prioritarianism (pp. 23–32). He thinks that economists, as opposed to moral philosophers, have not been sufficiently interested in the difference between the concern for equality itself and the idea of priority, and they have not thought carefully enough about determining the distinctive features of prioritarianism.<sup>10</sup>

According to Tungodden, the fundamental difference is that priority is concerned with the absolute circumstances of lives while equality is concerned with the relations between lives or their relative circumstances. This account corresponds to the way the difference is usually explained in moral philosophy. As I have mentioned, he thinks that the most interesting feature of prioritarianism is its ability to capture the view that there might be an absolute level of well-being such that people below that level would be given priority over those with better lives.<sup>11</sup> As Tungodden explains, this version of prioritarianism is related to the familiar idea that there is an absolute as opposed to a relative notion of poverty, and that a person living in absolute poverty possesses a very important moral claim to be helped.

I agree that the contrast between relative circumstances and absolute circumstances is fundamental to understanding the difference between equality and priority. However, I think it might have further implications that Tungodden does not explore, and in the end it might even conflict with his explanation of the basis of priority.<sup>12</sup>

Treating priority as concerned with the absolute condition of lives means, in the first instance, that when we compare the claims of two different people, the strength of their claims, as assessed by the priority view, will depend on their absolute levels of well-being, not on the relative difference between their levels of well-being.<sup>13</sup> If the person who is worse off should be given priority in distributing benefits, the greater importance

<sup>10</sup> In moral philosophy the priority view is discussed in Parfit (1995) and Temkin (1993, Chapter 9) (where it is called "extended humanitarianism").

<sup>11</sup> Tungodden recognizes that prioritarianism does not always take this form. For example, Thomas Nagel does not agree that priority only applies to a person whose level of welfare falls below some absolute level. According to him, whenever two people's levels of welfare are unequal, the worse-off person should receive at least some degree of priority. See Nagel (1991, Chapter 7, pp. 69–70).

<sup>12</sup> I should explain that my remarks in this section about differences between priority and equality are not intended to provide an answer to the arguments of those who suspect that we cannot draw a clear distinction between equality and priority. I am assuming that there is such a distinction, and that it is related to the difference between caring about absolute and caring about relative circumstances. My question is about how deep this distinction goes.

<sup>13</sup> Not everyone would agree. Frances Kamm describes a version of prioritarianism (giving it a different name, "urgency") in which the degree of priority given to the worse-off

of benefits that he receives is explained by his absolute level of well-being, not by the relative fact that his level of well-being is lower than the level of well-being of the person with whom he is being compared.

However, if priority is concerned with the absolute condition of lives rather than relations between lives, it might also mean that the notion of priority can have an application when we are only considering one person and one life. Equality cares about the existence of certain relations holding between lives, or between the levels of well-being of the people living those lives. In virtue of this, it initially seems that the value of equality only applies to choices made about different lives and different people. The priority view does not assign value to relations between lives, so there is no obvious reason why the same restriction should apply to it. Perhaps the distinctive features of prioritarianism can be present in a case where we are choosing benefits and harms for a single person.

How could the idea of priority be applied to a single life? We might think, for example, that it is more important to benefit a person given her actual level of well-being than it would have been if, instead, she had been significantly better off. Another possibility is that we might think that if a person has a very low quality of life it would be a mistake for her to accept the gamble of either a gain of well-being of a certain size or a loss of well-being of the same size when the probabilities of the gain and the loss were equal. The sizes of the gain and the loss might be the same, but a prioritarian could say that the loss should be seen as more important than the gain because the loss would reduce her to an even lower level of well-being.

A more complicated possibility is applying priority to people's levels of well-being at particular times during their lives rather than to their lives as temporal wholes assessed in terms of well-being.<sup>14</sup> This means thinking that a gain of well-being is especially important if it is received by someone who is badly off in terms of well-being at the particular time the gain is received. If we are willing to accept this idea in cases where different people are concerned, we could extend it to a single life viewed over time. We would think that a gain of well-being is especially important if a person receives it when she is badly off rather than at some other time when she is better off. This possibility is more complicated than the first just because it does involve the extra step of applying priority to people at particular times. I am not contending that if someone applies priority

person would depend both on that person's absolute level of well-being and the relative difference between that person's level and the level of well-being of the better-off person. See Kamm (1993, Chapter 13).

<sup>14</sup> Such a view presupposes that we can speak of a person enjoying a certain level of well-being at a time. I think that is possible, although one complication is that well-being may have some component goods that are spread over time rather than being possessed at one specific time.

to a single complete life they are also committed to also applying priority to people at particular times. But it does seem to me that both of these applications of priority to single person-cases are intuitively persuasive.<sup>15</sup>

The issue of applying priority to a single life is not relevant to most of the particular questions about priority that Tungodden discusses. Nevertheless, it is important because of its implications for how the basis of prioritarianism is to be understood. If priority applies in principle to a single person, then the foundations of prioritarianism will not involve ideas like properly expressing the moral equality of different people, or achieving a kind of unanimity between different people, or respecting the moral importance of the separateness of persons. If priority is a matter of the absolute condition of a life rather than comparisons between lives in both ways – the way Tungodden describes, and the way I have explained – it will greatly influence how we think about priority. It will also create a deeper difference between the values of priority and equality, since equality is concerned with relations between lives in both ways.<sup>16</sup>

I have suggested that prioritarianism, unlike the concern for equality, is not a moral response to the difference between different lives, a response that gives special urgency to improving the worse life once the relevant comparisons have been made. What then is the basic idea behind the priority view? I think it is best to understand the basis of the view as being a matter of the way in which we value well-being. We believe that when a life contains a low level of well-being (according to me, either at a time or summed over time), then an increase of well-being has special value. Priority is a matter of the special way in which we assign value to well-being rather than being a matter of morally important relations between different people. When we consider well-being, and the value that a gain in well-being adds to an outcome, we think that as a person comes to experience more well-being, the extra value that is contributed by each additional increment of well-being declines.<sup>17</sup> One important question

<sup>15</sup> I discuss a view that applies priority to people at particular times in McKerlie (2002).

<sup>16</sup> My discussion implies that in the case of equality we would not apply the value inside one life (unless perhaps we thought that this application could be supported by a revisionist account of personal identity that treated a person as a series of distinct selves). I defend this view in McKerlie (2001, Section III).

<sup>17</sup> For philosophical work that fits this approach see Mayerfeld (1999, Chapter 6). Mayerfeld believes that a kind of priority applies to suffering. That is, it can be better to reduce the pain of someone suffering intensely by a smaller amount rather than to reduce the pain of someone who is suffering less by a greater amount. Mayerfeld thinks that making such a judgement is a response to an intrinsic property of suffering. I would prefer to say that Mayerfeld is pointing out a fundamental fact about the way in which we value suffering. Mayerfeld does not discuss well-being in general as opposed to suffering, but if we believe that the best view of what well-being consists in would include suffering as a harm, this kind of priority would carry over to the case of well-being. And it may be reasonable to apply priority in this way to some of the other components of well-being

is whether some views of what well-being consists in (e.g., pleasure or satisfied preferences or achievements) will be more hospitable than others to such a notion of priority.

#### 4.

Moral philosophers who discuss equality or priority with economists become acutely aware of the importance economists place on measurement, and the difficulties that economists think measurement creates for attempts to state and explain apparently intuitive moral principles.

In the accounts that they give of equality and priority, moral philosophers implicitly make certain assumptions about measurement. If the values are being applied to well-being, they suppose that we can make interpersonal comparisons of levels of well-being and of the sizes of gains and losses of well-being. Typically, they also suppose that the comparisons can be cardinal and not just ordinal. For example, they think we can say that one person's gain in terms of well-being is more than twice as large as someone else's gain. Their claims about priority can be very specific. They might say that a small gain for someone who is badly off has more value than a somewhat larger gain for someone better off, but add that it would have less value than a much larger gain for the better-off person.

It is not that philosophers think that all of these features are essential to prioritarianism. For example, they might agree that there could be a version of the priority view that worked with ordinal rather than cardinal comparisons. However, philosophers do think that our notion of well-being permits the rich account of the priority view that they offer.

By contrast, many economists question whether we are really able to use the notion of well-being in these ways. They think that the only legitimate account of priority is a very austere one. From their perspective, moral philosophers have failed to think seriously about the theoretical problems raised by measurement. The result is that some philosophical claims are not just unreasonable, but unintelligible.

I will not attempt to address the most general issues about the possibility of measuring well-being. Arguably, determining the limits of measurement is not a matter for either the discipline of moral philosophy or the discipline of economics, but rather falls under empirical psychology.

apart from suffering. Mayerfeld also thinks that priority would apply inside a life to the suffering experienced at different times by one and the same person, as well to suffering experienced by different people. However, he believes that the degree of priority given to relieving more intense suffering will be greater in cases where we are choosing between helping different people than in cases where we are choosing between helping a person at one time and the same person at some other time.

However, I will discuss a more specific concern about measurement that applies particularly to the priority view.

The standard philosophical explanation of priority says that a smaller gain in well-being for one person can have more value than a larger gain for someone else. This claim assumes that we can establish two scales with respect to well-being: a scale that tells us how large a gain is, and a second scale that tells us how much value the gain has.<sup>18</sup>

The problem is easiest to see if we suppose that priority can be applied to one life (so this concern differs from the general worry about interpersonal comparisons of well-being). In this diagram the numbers above the horizontal line profess to measure equal-sized gains in well-being; the numbers below the line profess to measure the different values that prioritarianism would assign to those gains.<sup>19</sup>

0	1	2	3
/ - - - - - / - - - - - / - - - - - /			
0	1	1.85	2.60

Some economists, and moral philosophers familiar with economics,<sup>20</sup> doubt that we can actually distinguish the two scales that the priority view requires. To put the difficulty in my own way, suppose we identify well-being with the technical notion of utility. Then we are claiming that a smaller gain in terms of utility, received when I am badly off, can be more important than a larger gain in terms of utility received at some other time when I am better off. If I agree with this priority judgement, I would presumably choose to have the “smaller” gain rather than the “larger” gain. But according to the ordinary way of understanding utility, the relative size of gains in utility is measured by people’s choices. So if I would choose the former gain rather than the later one, my choice shows that the former gain really is larger rather than smaller in terms of utility, given that utility is being measured in the appropriate way. We have failed to establish what the priority view requires, that the smaller gain in terms of well-being can be greater in terms of value. We have failed to do this because we have failed to establish the difference between the scale of utility and the scale of value.

<sup>18</sup> The need for the two scales is explained in Parfit (1995, pp. 24–5).

<sup>19</sup> If we think that such a diagram expresses the basic idea in prioritarianism, we are committed to applying the view to single-person cases. The diagram illustrates the view about the value of well-being that was described at the end of Section 3.

<sup>20</sup> Including John Broome (forthcoming). I have benefited from reading “Equality versus priority: a useful distinction”.

It might be suggested that the problem would not arise if I would choose instead what I called the latter gain rather than the former gain. Then the latter gain would count as larger in terms of utility, and there would be a difference between the two scales if it is the former gain that has more value. However, the suggestion has an obvious drawback. If, clearly understanding the facts, I would not choose the former gain, and if this would be the case with other people as well, then what plausibility can there be in prioritarianism asserting that, nevertheless, the former gain is more important and has more value? This suggestion may avoid the problem about measurement, but only at the price of destroying the priority view's claim to be intuitively persuasive, which is the source of its popularity in moral philosophy.

Perhaps there is a solution to the problem about utility, although I will not attempt to provide one here. However, I think the difficulty would not necessarily arise for other ways of understanding well-being. Suppose, instead, that we understand well-being in terms of certain supposedly objectively good states or activities, what some writers call perfectionist goods. We might have ways of measuring these goods that are sufficiently independent of our choices to establish the two scales that prioritarianism requires.

For example, suppose we count the possession and use of intelligence as one component of well-being. And suppose we are willing to treat IQ level, as determined by certain tests, as a partial measure of intelligence (of course, that assumption is controversial, but not because of the issues at stake here). I can imagine a teacher thinking that it is more important to obtain a small gain in IQ for a child who stands badly in that respect rather than a larger gain for a child who is better off in terms of intelligence. The fact that we would choose the first gain does not tend to show that it is in fact a larger gain in terms of intelligence.

Of course invoking a supposedly "objective" notion of well-being will not end the debate. It might be replied that although we do make judgements about the comparative sizes of gains in qualities like intelligence, these judgements are themselves ultimately explained by our preferences. The claim would be that if we count one person's improvement in intelligence as being larger than someone else's, this is really because our preference for the first gain is stronger than our preference for the second gain, and we value the first gain more than the second gain. So, we have still not provided the appropriate foundation for a notion of priority, if priority means assigning greater value to the smaller gain where the sense of "smaller" we are using is itself completely independent of what we prefer and value.

However, this reply needs to be defended by argument. The connection between the size of an increase in intelligence and what we would prefer,

value and choose is not direct and straightforward like the connection between the size of a gain in utility and what we would prefer, value and choose. Moreover, the example I began with creates a problem for the reply. In that example, we count the gain to the more intelligent person as being larger, so, according to the reply, it should be this gain that we would prefer, value and choose. Nevertheless, there was some plausibility in saying that we would actually prefer and choose the supposedly smaller gain for the less intelligent person.

If priority is applied to something other than well-being, there is no reason to think that similar difficulties about measurement will arise. One relevant example is Frances Kamm's notion of need, which is essentially a version of priority applied to the length of people's lives rather than to the goods that the lives contain.<sup>21</sup> She thinks that in distributing scarce life-extending medical resources, we might think it more important to give someone whose age is 20 two more years of life, rather than to give someone whose age is 80 five additional years of life. She suggests that such judgements are partly explained by what she calls the "diminishing marginal value" of further life. Suppose we agree with her judgement about this example. The fact that we would prefer the two extra years for the younger person does not tend to show that the two years would somehow be a longer temporal extension than the five extra years for the older person.

## 5.

I have described differences in the ways that economics and moral philosophy consider egalitarianism. However, the differences should not obscure deeper and more important similarities. Both disciplines are concerned with understanding values like equality. They aim at clear, explicit formulations of egalitarian principles. If the best understanding of the value contributes to a case for or against its importance, both disciplines would draw the appropriate conclusions.

I will end with a claim that might seem extreme. If I am right about the aim of economists who study egalitarianism – to explain the structural features of the moral views that express egalitarian values – then those economists are in fact practising moral philosophy in this aspect of their work.

This is not a way of claiming that when there is a difference between the economic approach and the philosophical approach the philosophical approach is superior. It is possible that the economists are right about all the points at issue that I have discussed. But this would mean that the

<sup>21</sup> Kamm (1993, Chapter 12).

philosophers have been making mistakes in moral philosophy, while the economists have answered the philosophical questions correctly.

The economists might even be correct in their most challenging claims about egalitarianism. Perhaps the problem about measuring well-being shows that the idea of priority cannot even be coherently stated. Perhaps there is no way of distinguishing between equality and priority. Perhaps some minimal and incontestable conditions placed on equality prove that the only defensible principle of equality is equivalent to maximin. But if these radical claims are right, the conclusion that they are right is a conclusion of moral philosophy. If the arguments succeed, moral philosophy cannot set them aside as the results of a fundamentally different way of thinking about the values in question.

My suggestion may seem merely semantic, an attempt to extend the boundaries of philosophy by fiat. But I think it is significant. The two disciplines might highlight different ideas, and develop different arguments, but their goal is the same. And that goal has traditionally been identified as the goal of moral philosophy. When moral philosophy itself is properly understood, it should not be unwelcome news for economists to learn that this is what they have been engaged in.

#### REFERENCES

- Broome, John. Forthcoming. Equality versus priority: a useful distinction. In *"Goodness" and "Fairness": Ethical Issues in Health Resource Allocation*. Daniel Wikler and Christopher J. L. Murray (eds.) World Health Organization
- Dworkin, Ronald. 2000. *Sovereign Virtue*. Harvard University Press
- Kamm, Frances. 1993. *Morality, Mortality*. Volume I. Oxford University Press
- Nagel, Thomas. 1991. *Equality and Partiality*. Oxford University Press
- Mayerfeld, Jamie. 1999. *Suffering and Moral Responsibility*. Oxford University Press
- McKerlie, Dennis. 2001. Dimensions of equality. *Utilitas*, 13:263–88
- McKerlie, Dennis. 2002. Justice between the young and the old. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 30:152–77
- Parfit, Derek. 1995. Equality or priority? The Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas Press. Reprinted in *The Ideal of Equality*, pp. 81–125. Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams (eds.). St Martin's Press Inc. and Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Temkin, Larry S. 1987. Intransitivity and the mere addition paradox. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 16:138–67
- Temkin, Larry S. 1993. *Inequality*. Oxford University Press
- Tungodden, Bertil. 2000. Egalitarianism: is leximin the only option? *Economics and Philosophy*, 16:229–45
- Tungodden, Bertil. 2002. The value of equality. *Economics and Philosophy*, 19:1–44
- Vallentyne, Peter. 2000. Equality, efficiency, and the priority of the worse off. *Economics and Philosophy*, 16:1–19