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THE VALUE OF EQUALITY

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Over the years, egalitarian philosophers have made some challenging claims about the nature of egalitarianism. They have argued that egalitarian reasoning should make us reject the Pareto principle; that the Rawlsian leximin principle is not an egalitarian idea; that the Pigou–Dalton principle needs modification; that the intersection approach faces deep problems; that the numbers should not count within an egalitarian framework, and that egalitarianism should make us reject the property of transitivity in normative reasoning. In this paper, taking the recent philosophical debate on equality versus priority as the starting point, I review these claims from the point of view of an economist.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, egalitarian philosophers have made some challenging claims about the nature of egalitarianism. They have argued that the Rawlsian leximin principle is not an egalitarian position (McKerlie, 1994), that egalitarian reasoning should sometimes make us reject the Pareto principle (Nagel, 1991; Temkin, 1993, 2000a), that the numbers should not count within an egalitarian framework (Nagel, 1979; Scanlon, 1998), that egalitarianism should make us reject the property of transitivity in normative reasoning (Temkin, 1987), that the Pigou–Dalton principle needs serious modification in order to capture the idea of egalitarianism (Temkin, 1993), and that the intersection approach faces deep problems when applied to egalitarian reasoning (Temkin, 1993).

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Most economists would immediately reject these views. They find the Rawlsian position the most obvious example of egalitarianism, the Pareto principle and transitivity beyond discussion, insensitivity to numbers plainly implausible (even within an egalitarian framework), the Pigou–Dalton principle the hallmark of egalitarianism, and the intersection approach extremely powerful and plausible. Why is this so? Is it because most economists acquire political philosophy second-hand from a small number of translators (Roemer, 1996, p. 10) – or possibly disregard discussions of normative statements altogether (Atkinson, 2001) – and, hence, do not pay attention to the many elaborate arguments underlying these challenging claims? Or is it because philosophers produce arguments that are already well-known (and may have been rejected) in the economic literature?

A specific case in point is the recent philosophical debate on equality versus priority. Many economists think that there is nothing new in this debate, whereas philosophers feel that there is still a need for clarification. Is this because philosophers have missed the economic literature on equality or is it because the economists do not capture the subtleties involved? As an economist, I will make an attempt to answer this question by studying in more detail some of the central philosophical arguments in this debate. Actually, this project will move us beyond the question about the usefulness of the distinction between egalitarianism and prioritarianism, and into all the challenges listed above. But there will be more challenges left untouched. The philosophical literature on egalitarianism is full of suggestions and ideas worthy of study, and it is obviously impossible to deal with all of them in one paper.[1] Hence, I will have to restrict myself to what I consider the most pressing points. And I hope to show that on these issues both philosophers and economists can learn from each other, even though this does not necessarily imply a change of viewpoint. What it probably will imply, though, is that we have a more thorough understanding of the kind of egalitarianism we eventually defend.

Egalitarians are concerned with a number of different inequalities: political, legal, social, and economic (Nagel, 1979). In most of the present debate on egalitarianism and prioritarianism, however, the framework has been narrowed down to a comparison of distributions of well-being (Parfit, 1995). This is not an uncontroversial restriction of the present

[1] By way of illustration, I will not discuss the time dimension of egalitarianism (McKerlie, 1989, 1992, 1997, 2000; Kappel, 1997), the non-identity problem (Holtug, 1999, forthcoming; Persson, 1999) and how to cope with uncertainty within egalitarianism (Broome, 1991, forthcoming; Fleurbaey, 2001; Rabinowicz, 2001a). For an overview of egalitarian reasoning, see (among others) Barry (1989, 1995), Pojman and Westmoreland (1997), Mason (1998) and Clayton and Williams (2000). Kekes (1997) provides an interesting critical response to the egalitarian framework.

problem, as stressed by among others Scanlon (1998) and Wolff (2000). Still, I will stay within this moral framework and consider how undeserved, nonvoluntary inequalities of well-being in a society affect our evaluations of social alternatives. Hence, I will not examine the important debate on the appropriate equalisandum in egalitarianism, even though I will briefly comment on this issue on a few occasions.[2]

Formally speaking, I will assume that for any population $N = \{1, \ldots, n\}$, each social alternative is characterized by an n-dimensional well-being vector $x = (x_1, \ldots x_n)$, where x_i is the well-being of person i in society.[3] Moreover, I will assume that our framework satisfies a minimal condition of anonymity, saying that the identity of an individual should not influence our reasoning (if we consider two alternatives $x = (1, 2, 3)$ and $y = (2, 1, 3)$, then the minimal condition of anonymity says that we should be indifferent between x and y).

Most people care about inequalities. But why? Scanlon (2000) suggests that this is mainly due to the *instrumental* value of equality.

> I find that my reasons for favoring equality are in fact quite diverse, and that most of them can be traced back to fundamental values other than equality itself. The idea that equality is, in itself a fundamental moral value turns out to play a surprisingly limited role in my reasons for thinking that many of the forms of inequality which we see around us should be eliminated. (p. 21)

A reduction in inequality may, among other things, alleviate suffering, the feeling of inferiority, the dominance of some over the lives of others, and in many cases these effects are of sufficient importance to motivate our concern for the alleviation of inequality.[4] But some people think that there are reasons for caring about equality that are independent of its instrumental value, and it is the plausibility of assigning *intrinsic* value to equality that will be my concern in this paper. Moving beyond a direct appeal to moral intuition, there are basically two ways of assessing such an idea. We may either assess it by its implications or by its link to more fundamental moral principles.[5]

[2] On this, see among others Rawls (1971, 1993), Sen (1980, 1992), Dworkin (1981), Cohen (1989) and Scanlon (1993).

I will also assume that there are no informational biases, such that we have a quantitative notion of well-being. This is in contrast to much of the economic literature in this field, where the focus has been on the implications of informational constraints on our understanding of egalitarianism; see Bossert and Weymark (1999) for a survey.

[3] In other words, we only consider theories where well-being is ultimately measured in a one-dimensional way. This includes welfarist theories (see Blackorby, Donaldson and Weymark (1984) for a formal definition), but also allows for many other interpretations of well-being.

[4] See Anderson (1999).

[5] This is what Sen (1980) names the case-implication approach and prior-principle approach to moral reasoning.

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It has been suggested that to ask for a deeper justification of the intrinsic value of equality is a misplaced question.

> The teleological version of the principle claims that inequality is itself something that is bad. Suppose that the claim is true. If it is true, there is no reason to think we will be able to explain the badness of inequality in terms of the badness of other things, or in terms of some other value that is not a matter of badness, any more than that we can explain why suffering is bad in that way. There is no obvious reason for saying that the claim that inequality is bad must be supported by an argument while the claim that suffering is bad does not require support. (McKerlie, 1996, p. 277)[6]

I have doubts about this view, and should like to see a further defence of the badness of inequality. As I see it, the most promising approach would be to take the idea of equal moral status of people as a point of departure, and then argue that an equal distribution is valuable because it captures this fundamental equality in at least one relevant dimension. Certainly, such a position needs to be developed much further.[7] In this paper, however, following much of the recent literature on egalitarianism, I will leave this problem aside and mainly focus on clarifying and evaluating various *implications* of assigning intrinsic value to equality.[8]

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, I provide some methodological remarks that are important to have in mind when we move along with our discussion. In Section 3, I consider what is commonly called the "levelling down objection" to egalitarianism and how it relates to "the slogan" and the Pareto principle. Section 4 contains a discussion of how a concern for equality should affect our social evaluations. In particular, I discuss the link between equality promotion and Rawlsian reasoning, how the value of equality may be combined with utilitarian reasoning, and the criticism of the Pigou–Dalton principle and the intersection approach. However, there are other ways of justifying a concern for equality, and in Section 5 I provide a discussion of prioritarianism and how this perspective relates to egalitarianism. It has also been argued that a main implication of a concern for equality is that we should endorse non-aggregative reasoning (though not necessarily the leximin principle), and this view is explored in

[6] See also McKerlie (2003).

[7] For related discussions, see, among others, Nagel (1979), Kymlicka (1990), Sen (1992), Kolm (1996, 1997), Temkin (1993, 2003) Hausman (2001), Rabinowicz (2001b), Persson (forthcoming).

[8] This also implies that I will not discuss the distinction between telic and deontic egalitarianism; see Broome (1991), Temkin (1993), Parfit (1995), McKerlie (1996), Cohen (2000). In my discussion, I will deal mainly with telic egalitarianism, that is, the position claiming that inequality is bad even in cases where the question of justice does not arise. Deontic egalitarians claim that inequality is unjust, because justice demands equal treatment of people that stand in a relationship of justice (Parfit, 1995, p. 8).

Section 6. In Section 7 I provide a discussion of the criticism of the axiom of transitivity and Section 8 contains concluding remarks.

2. SOME METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

When studying implications of assigning intrinsic value to equality (or any other moral idea), it is important to make a distinction between implications for the ranking of the alternatives and implications for the justification of any particular ranking. Economists have usually been concerned with the former issue, whereas, as we will see, many philosophers have been more concerned with the latter.

This may sound as if economists have not been concerned with justification, but this is not so. Justification can take place at different levels and, therefore, to avoid any misunderstanding, let me briefly outline the standard approach to justification within normative economics. First, it is assumed that any ranking should constitute a reflexive and transitive binary betterness relation (we return to the assumption of transitivity in Section 7). Second, economists introduce principles that constrain the betterness relation, and we say that a set of principles justify a betterness relation if it provides a characterization of the betterness relation, that is, if and only if it is the only betterness relation satisfying all these principles. Hence, in order to study implications of assigning intrinsic value to equality, an economist would formulate a principle saying how this idea restricts the betterness relation and then study logical compatibility with other principles. As an example, I will apply this approach in Section 4 when arguing that the leximin betterness relation can be justified on the basis of egalitarian reasoning.

Notice, though, that economists usually do not impose restrictions on the cardinal notion of betterness, that is, economists will not argue that it should be better to move from, say, x to y than from y to z. This is in contrast to some philosophers. For example, Parfit (1995, p. 24) in his discussion of prioritarianism, suggests the law of diminishing moral goodness, saying that utility has diminishing marginal moral importance. Even though a restriction of this kind may serve as an argument for giving priority to the worse off, it is shunned by economists.[9] A cardinal notion of betterness does not make much sense to most economists and, moreover, is not necessary in order to capture any distributional concern. As shown by Dasgupta, Sen and Starrett (1973), all that is needed for this purpose is a restriction on our ordinal notion of betterness.[10] Hence, in the following, we will stay within a purely ordinal framework of betterness.

[9] If we impose a concavity assumption on our notion of betterness, as Parfit does, then this implies priority to the worse off.

[10] This requirements is known as *S*-concavity; see Sen (1973, p. 52) for a rather non-technical discussion.

However, a second level of justification is needed, to wit, justification of the principles imposed on the betterness relation. This is certainly recognized by economists, but usually considered an issue better left to philosophers. At this level of analysis, in a discussion of egalitarianism, the concern is not how the assignment of intrinsic value to equality may restrict the ranking of alternatives, but how it affects the justification of any particular ranking. And, as we shall see in the following sections, an essential part of the debate on equality versus priority is related to this issue (see also Fleurbaey, 2001, p. 1), which may explain why the topic has mainly occupied philosophers.

3. THE LEVELLING DOWN OBJECTION AND THE SLOGAN

It is commonly believed that egalitarians should accept the following principle.

The Weak Principle of Equality: If one alternative is more equal than another, it is better in one respect.

However, it has been argued that this principle faces a serious problem, which Parfit (1995) names *the levelling down objection*. A reduction in inequality can take place by harming the better off in society without improving the situation of the worse off. But this cannot be good *in any respect*, contrary to the claim of the weak principle of equality. Hence, according to the objection, inequality cannot be intrinsically bad.

As we can see, this objection does not attack any particular restriction egalitarians are committed to impose on the betterness relation.[11] Its target is the way egalitarians have to justify any particular betterness ranking in cases where there is a loss for the better off and no gain for the worse off. Even though egalitarians may insist that such a loss makes things worse all things considered, they have to accept that it is better in one respect. Or at least, this is what the levelling down objection claims.

Temkin (1993, 2000a) argues that the force of the levelling down objection is taken from a principle he names "the slogan".

The Slogan: One situation cannot be worse (or better) than another situation in any respect if there is no one for whom it is worse (or better) in any respect.

On the basis of the slogan, we can defend the levelling down objection. In order to do this, however, we need to make a further assumption. We need to assume that it is *possible* to level down the better off without *benefitting the worse off in any respect.* If it is always the case that inequality is bad for the worse off in some respect, then it is not possible to level down

[11] Even though the weak principle of equality has some implications for the betterness relation. If x is more equal than y and not worse in any respect, then the weak principle of equality implies that x is better than y. See also Klint Jensen (2003) and Brown (2003).

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without improving the situation for some in some respect. Consequently, the levelling down objection loses its force. If levelling down is good for some people in some respect, it seems trivial to argue that levelling down is generally good in some respect. In any case, there is no longer any link to the slogan.

Parfit (1995) argues that the mere fact of inequality is not in itself bad for the people who are worse off.

> The mere fact of inequality is not, in itself, bad for the people who are worse off. Such inequalities may be naturally unfair. And it would of course be better for these people if they themselves were better off. But it would not be better for them if, without any effects on them, the other people were just as badly off. (p. 29)

I find this perspective plausible. It is hard to see that inequality should be bad for the worse off (in any respect) if they are not aware of this inequality.[12] At the same time, egalitarians claim that this inequality makes

[12] This might not be the case if we talk about the badness of inequality following from unjust treatment. Even if people are unaware of unjust treatment, we might argue that it is bad for them. In order to defend such a view in detail we would have to outline a theory of self-interest. But my general view is that if we move beyond the idea that mental states or unrestricted desire fulfilment is *all* that matters for people, then we would end up on a confirmative note. Relations to other people are valuable beyond the fact that we desire it or attain good feelings from it (Scanlon, 1998, p. 125). It is valuable *to have* good friends, not only to feel that you have good friends. It is valuable *to be treated justly*, not only to feel that you are treated justly. That is what Broome (1991) has in mind when he argues that unjust treatment is plainly an individual harm.

> Unfairness, as I have described it, is plainly an individual harm. There is unfairness if someone's claim is satisfied less than in proportion to its strength. Since a claim is a duty owed particularly to the person, the unfairness is plainly suffered by that person. If, say, people have equal claims to the satisfaction of needs, and some have their needs less well satisfied than others do, then those people are suffering unfairness. (p. 198)

Temkin (2000a, pp. 27–28) is not supportive of this line of reasoning. He argues that this will save the slogan only by robbing it of its teeth. But is that a problem? If our reasoning is correct, then we do not need to attack the slogan in order to undermine the levelling down objection in cases involving social injustice. In these cases, unjust treatment is always bad for people, and hence it is not possible to level down without improving the situation for some *in some respect*. Of course, this would also be true if we not only levelled down the better off to the level of the worse off but further worsened the situation for everyone such that the worse off – all things considered – were worse off than before the change. Even in this case of equality would the situation improve for the worse off in one respect, to wit with respect to justice?

However, this is not to endorse Broome's (1991) view where he argues that if injustice is bad then it is bad because it is bad for someone. My argument is that unjust treatment should be considered bad for people, but that does not rule out the possibility that unjust treatment can be bad *beyond* the fact that it is bad for people. On the relationship between levelling down and our understanding of well-being, see also Wolff (2000).

the alternative bad in one respect, and hence we have a conflict with the slogan.

Should this cause us to give up egalitarianism or the slogan?[13] Temkin (2000a) argues at length, by considering a number of other moral cases, that there is no reason to endorse the slogan. And even though I accept his conclusion, I think that Temkin seriously overvalues the implications of giving up the slogan. First, it is certainly not the case that we disprove the levelling down objection by disproving the slogan. We may still insist that levelling down is not a case where the world becomes better in one respect. Second, contrary to what Temkin seems to think, it is not the case that we challenge the core of normative economic and political philosophy by disproving the slogan. Temkin (2000a, p. 134) suggests that the slogan underlies many arguments in economics. But that is not so. The Pareto principle is the core of normative economics, and I have not seen any economic work explicitly supporting the slogan. Of course, this might be due to the fact that economists usually do not approach the problem at this level of analysis, but I doubt it. Temkin also suggests that Rawls's difference principle is often defended (in a comparison with a purely egalitarian rule) by use of the slogan.

> When [the difference principle] allows vast gains for the better-off to promote tiny gains for the worse-off, it is often defended by invoking the Slogan. (Temkin, 2000a, p. 134)

Is that really the case? To my knowledge, most people defend this by reference to the following version of the Pareto principle (introduced by Broome, 1991).

The Principle of Personal Good: For all alternatives x and y, if everyone is at least as well off in x as in y and someone strictly better off, then x is better than y.[14]

The same can be said about Temkin's reference to the theories of Nozick, Locke, and Scanlon, where Temkin argues that the force of these arguments follows from the implications that "if no one is worsened by the exchange, it cannot be bad" (2000a, p. 134), "as long as there is no one for whom acquiring the property is worse, it cannot be bad" (p. 134), and "there is nothing intrinsically bad about violating apparent rights when this benefits some and harms no one" (p. 135). But these are all appeals to the principle of personal good and nothing else. And, given the fact that the slogan and the principle of personal good are logically distinct

[13] Or maybe revise the slogan slightly, see Holtug (1998).

[14] Structurally, it is equivalent to the Pareto principle, but it is stated in the space of individual good or well-being and not in the space of individual preferences. Given the fact that the space of well-being is our concern in this paper, I will, in the following, only deal with the principle of personal good. But none of my arguments depends on this distinction.

principles, we cannot rebut the principle of personal good by disproving the slogan. Of course, we may think that the falsity of the slogan makes it less likely that the principle of personal good is true (see Temkin, 1993, pp. 256–7), but that is far from obvious.

Even if we put the slogan aside, we still face the question about the validity of the levelling down objection and the validity of the principle of personal good. Many people seem to be moved by the intuition captured by the levelling down objection (Parfit, 1995, p. 17; McKerlie, 1994, p. 27; Temkin, 2000a, p. 154), in particular, if it is stated by some extreme example where we compare a situation where one is miserable (maybe tortured!) and the rest are comfortable to one where everyone is miserable. However, when we play around with our moral intuitions in cases like this, it is essential to notice that the weak principle of equality is really a very *weak* principle. It is not saying that equality is everything, it is simply pointing out that if there are undeserved, nonvoluntary inequalities in society, then there is something bad about the situation. Of course, if this badness can only be removed by torturing someone, then it is obvious that the new situation is worse all things considered.

Admittedly, I am not sure how to rebut the intuition of people endorsing the levelling down objection, but in my view it does not really challenge egalitarianism as a viable normative position or the nature of the betterness relation you eventually have to defend. Let me explain. First, if one should accept the levelling down objection, one is not committed to the view that equality promotion is never valuable. As argued by Kagan (1988), Kamm (1996), and Temkin (2000a), a principle may have genuine significance in some settings even if it lacks significance in others. Hence, we may defend an egalitarian position saying that equality promotion is only valuable as a good way of solving distributive conflicts in society.

Second, our view on the principle of personal good should not depend on whether we accept or reject the levelling down objection. Strong egalitarianism, violating the principle of personal good, is, as I see it, implausible even if one rejects the levelling down objection and endorses the weak principle of equality.[15] One way of defending this claim could

[15] This claim is certainly sensitive to our understanding of well-being, as stressed by Wolff (2000). If we have a rather narrow interpretation of well-being, then it might make sense to favour an equal distribution of well-being to an unequal distribution where everyone has a higher level of well-being. This is the kind of view suggested by Norman (1998).

> [E]quality at a lower level of well-being might be seen as preferable to inequality at a higher level of well-being for everyone. Imagine an egalitarian community at a fairly low level of economic development whose members, though not experiencing great hardship or absolute poverty, have a simple life style. Given the opportunity of economic development which would make them all better off but introduce substantial inequalities, they might prefer to remain less prosperous but equal. I am not thinking

be to appeal to the structural fact observed by Parfit (1995), namely, that there can be much initial inequality in situations of levelling down only if the better-off people lose a lot and, on this basis, argue that the value of equality probably never will outweigh the loss of welfare in such cases. But this argument is on shaky ground (McKerlie, 1996, p. 17), because it does not really preclude the possibility that the value of equality sometimes has the upper hand. In Broome's words (1991, p. 183), by such an argument, the truth of the principle of personal good would depend on a fortunate coincidence. An alternative route could be to follow Broome (1991, p. 184) and defend the principle of personal good as an analytical truth about betterness. But I do not consider this a satisfactory approach. In my view, the principle of personal good is a requirement that can be defended within egalitarianism by arguing that the principle captures the most fundamental expression of moral equality among people according to the principle of unanimity (see also Nagel, 1979, 1991; Brink, 1993; Kolm, 1996). However, I recognize that this is a controversial idea which needs a substantial amount of discussion and, thus, I leave this topic for another occasion.

In the rest of the paper I will only consider betterness relations that satisfy the principle of personal good. This does not mean, however, that I endorse Broome's (1991) claim that the badness of inequality does not have independent force in the determination of the goodness of alternatives. On the contrary, I believe that, potentially, the badness of inequality has tremendous force in the ranking of cases where there is a distributive conflict, an issue I now turn to.

4. MODERATE EGALITARIANISM

In this section, our aim is to study the set of betterness relations which may be justified on the basis of moderate egalitarianism, that is, by combining the principle of personal good with a concern for equality promotion in

> here of the typical attendant evils of industrialization such as crime and social conflict and environmental pollution which would enable us to explain their choice by saying that they would not really be better off. I am supposing that they would acknowledge that they would be better off with economic development, but still prefer equality. . . . It is a preference for certain kinds of social relations. They may fear that, with greater inequality, they will become more distanced from one another . . . the more prosperous among them will be disdainful and supercilious and the less prosperous will become more servile and more resentful, and they will no longer be united by shared experience and a shared condition. (p. 51)

Of course, in order to avoid any violation of the general principle of personal good in this case, we simply have to include the preference for social relations in our understanding of well-being. As a response to such a move, Wolff (2000, p. 7) remarks that one of the main implications of a discussion of the structure of egalitarianism may be that we get a better understanding of the appropriate interpretation of the concept of well-being.

distributive conflicts. In order to do this, however, we have to clarify somewhat further our understanding of the concept of inequality. It is trivial to say that equality is better than inequality. But we need more than this. We need to compare different unequal distributions. There has been much formal work on this within economics (see, among others, Atkinson, 1970; Sen, 1973; Dasgupta, Sen and Starrett, 1973; Kolm, 1976 a,b; Blackorby and Donaldson, 1978, 1980; Shorrocks, 1980; Bossert and Pfingstein, 1990, and for overviews, Sen and Foster, 1997; Cowell, 2000), but I will take as the point of departure Vallentyne's (2000) claim that:

> [a]ll plausible conceptions of equality hold that, where perfect equality does not obtain . . . any benefit (no matter how small) to a worst off person that leaves him/her still worst off person has priority (with respect to equality promotion) over any benefit (no matter how large) to a best off person. (p. 1)

This is a very weak claim *about the concept of equality* and it is satisfied by all well-known inequality measures. Actually, I will argue that it is an analytic truth that equality satisfies this property, which, in the following, I will refer to as *conditional contracting extremes* on equality.

But, it turns out that to accept this has *strong* implications for the nature of the betterness relation if we accept some further conditions on normative reasoning. In order to see this, however, we have to clarify a minor ambiguity in Vallentyne's formulation. On the one hand, we can read this condition as only dealing with two-person cases, that is, cases where there is one best-off person and one worst-off person. On the other hand, we may allow for a stronger interpretation which also covers cases where there are several best-off and worst-off persons. To illustrate the difference, consider $x = (1, 3, 4, 4, 6)$, $y = (2, 3, 4, 4, 5)$, and $z = (3, 3, 4, 4, 4)$. The weaker interpretation only implies that y is more equal than x, whereas the stronger interpretation also implies that z is more equal than y. It should be uncontroversial to adopt the stronger version, that is, strong conditional contracting extremes on equality and, hence, I will impose this restriction on our understanding of the concept of equality.

To study implications for the betterness relation, we need to introduce a condition on the betterness relation that captures the idea of equality promotion in cases where there is a distributive conflict. The basic question then is whether we want to pay attention to aspects other than equality promotion when we rank alternatives where there is a conflict of interest. Shortly we will return to the case where we allow for a trade-off between utilitarian and egalitarian considerations, but let us first consider the case where we *only* care about equality promotion when solving distributive conflicts. To capture this view, we impose the following condition on the betterness relation.

Strict Priority to Equality Promotion: For all alternatives x and y, if (1) there are persons with higher well-being in x than y and persons with higher well-being in y than x, and (2) x is more equal than y, then x is better than y.

Let us now define *strict moderate egalitarianism* as the position that imposes a minimal condition of anonymity (as defined in Section 1), the principle of personal good and strict priority to equality promotion on the betterness relation.

It should be clear that the exact nature of the betterness relation capturing strict moderate egalitarianism depends on our understanding of inequality in various situations. However, by endorsing strong conditional contracting extremes as a condition on the concept of equality, we know that strict priority to equality promotion at least implies the following restriction on the betterness relation.

Strong Conditional Contracting Extremes (on betterness): For all alternatives x and y, if (1) all the best-off persons in x are best-off persons in y and their well-being level is strictly lower in x than y; (2) all the worst-off persons in x are worst-off persons in y and their well-being level is strictly higher in x than y, and (3) the well-being of everyone else is the same in x and y; then x is better than y.

Let me stress that this condition is only restricting the betterness relation with respect to distributive conflicts between the *best off* and the *worst off*. For all other cases, it is silent. Hence, it does not rule out the possibility of taking into account the size of gains and losses when there is a conflict between, say, the worst off and the second worst off (as long as the second worst off is not also the best off). More importantly, it should be an uncontroversial condition to impose on the betterness relation *if* your view is that distributive conflicts should be solved by promoting equality.

Immediately we can see that strict moderate egalitarianism implies a *discontinuous* betterness relation. Compare $x = (1, 2, 2, 2, 4)$, $y = (1, 2, 2, 2, 10)$, and $z = (1 - \epsilon, 2, 2, 2, 10)$. The principle of personal good implies that y is better than x, whereas strong conditional contracting extremes implies that x is better than z whatever small number ϵ is. Continuity, on the other hand, demands that if y is better than x, then for a sufficiently small number ϵ, x is not better than z. I stress this rather obvious implication for two reasons. First, it shows that in a discussion of egalitarianism, it is not at all trivial to assume that the betterness relation is continuous. Economists often do that (see, for example, Ebert, 1987). Second, it indicates the close link between equality promotion and Rawlsian reasoning.

Let us move on to cases where there is a conflict between the worst off and people who are not the best off. Do we still have to give absolute priority to the worst-off if we are to promote equality? McKerlie (1994) does not think so.[16]

[16] Actually, Rawls (1974, p. 648) expresses a similar view.

> A change might give a small benefit to the very worst-off group, but cause a much larger loss for other groups that are also badly-off. The difference principle will support the change. Some people will think that the change would be wrong. If we oppose the change, we are choosing the better outcome in utilitarian terms, but *we are also preventing an increase in inequality* and avoiding serious harm to people who are badly off. If we find this objection convincing we will decide that the difference principle does not explain our distinctively egalitarian moral judgments. (pp. 28–9, own emphasis).

Consider $x = (2, 10, 100)$ and $y = (1, 100, 100)$. This is the kind of case McKerlie has in mind. And many well-known inequality measures would provide support for the conclusion that there is more inequality in x than in y. If so, then strict priority to equality promotion implies that y is better than x. But it is not obvious that we should accept such a view on inequality. There is a very good reason for arguing in favour of the opposite conclusion. The reduction in well-being of the second worst off (when moving from y to x) causes a *decrease* in the distance between the second worst off and the worst off which is *equal* to the *increase* in distance between the second worst off and the best off. Which is worse? Of course, there are several plausible answers (Temkin, 1993). But to me it does not seem unreasonable to argue that the isolation of the worst off at the bottom, *from the point of view of inequality*, outweighs the gain of having the second worst off getting equal to the best off.

There is another problem here as well. If we accept the claim of transitivity in normative reasoning, then the betterness relation must satisfy the following maximin property if it satisfies anonymity, the principle of personal good and strong conditional contracting extremes on betterness.

Maximin: For all alternatives x and y, if the level of well-being in the worst-off position is strictly higher in x than y, then x is better than y.[17]

Consequently, if we think (as McKerlie does) that maximin sometimes violates equality promotion, then we have an impossibility result. In that case, it is not possible to combine strict priority to equality promotion in distributive conflicts and the principle of personal good within a reasonable framework satisfying transitivity.[18] Some people, like Temkin

[17] Notice that this property is not saying that we are indifferent between cases where the worst off attains the same level of well-being. That would violate the principle of personal good. The maximin property is only saying that in cases of conflict involving the worst off, we should assign absolute priority to the worst off if we are to promote equality. In any other conflict, it is silent. See Tungodden (2000a,b) for a detailed discussion of this result.

[18] Let me stress that this result is very different from the trivial impossibility result which says that it is impossible to combine the principle of personal good with strict priority to equality promotion *in all cases*. The conflict between equality promotion and the general principle of personal good was discussed in the previous section. Here, our concern is

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(1993) and Kolm (2000), deny an a priori acceptance of transitivity, and I will elaborate on this issue in Section 7. However, for those who accept this condition as a requirement of consistency, maximin seems to be the only option.[19]

Let me briefly illustrate this impossibility with an example. Suppose that $y = (1, 100, 100)$ is considered more equal than $x = (2, 10, 100)$, and hence that strict priority to equality promotion implies that y is better than x. Compare x with $z = (2, 10, 10)$. From the principle of personal good, it follows that x is better than z. By transitivity, we now have that y is better than z. But this violates strict priority to equality promotion according to the minimal requirement of strong conditional contracting extremes on equality.

Moreover, if we are willing to accept a further restriction on the concept of equality, then we can establish a complete link between strict moderate egalitarianism and the stronger leximin principle.[20] Vallentyne (2000, p. 6) argues that equality is increased if there is a decrease in the well-being of a person above the mean who stays above the mean, an increase in the well-being of a person below the mean who stays below the mean and no changes occur elsewhere in the distribution.[21] If we accept this suggestion and impose strict priority to equality promotion, the principle of personal good, anonymity and transitivity on the betterness relation, then we have a characterization of the leximin principle.[22]

In sum, I believe this shows that there is a very close link between equality promotion and Rawlsian reasoning. This has also been suggested by Barry (1989, pp. 229–34), who recognizes that equality promotion should imply absolute priority to *the worst off* in a conflict with *the best off*. However, Barry's approach has been heavily criticized by McKerlie (1994).

to study the possibility of combining the general principle of personal good with strict priority to equality promotion *when there are losers and winners.*

[19] However, there are various ways of responding to this result if we do not accept that maximin always promotes equality. We may accept that this result shows us that maximin is the best we can do within a transitive framework, but still think that this framework is imperfect in the sense that it sometimes violates equality promotion. Or we may argue in favour of a "second best analysis", where we allow for the possibility that strong conditional contracting extremes on equality are sometimes violated, if this makes it possible for the overall framework to better capture our intuitions on equality promotion in other cases.

[20] The leximin principle states that if the worst off is at the same level in the two alternatives, then we should assign absolute priority to the second worst off and so on. For a critical discussion of the link between the leximin principle and Rawls's difference principle, see Tungodden (1999). See also Van Parijs (2001) for a thorough discussion of the difference principle.

[21] This is also suggested by Temkin (1993, p. 25).

[22] See Tungodden (2000a) for a further discussion of this result.

> Barry's argument breaks down at the last stage, when he tries to explain why we should choose the particular Pareto superior outcome that is best for the worst-off group. . . . Any argument from equality to the difference principle faces the same problem. If we care about equality it is plausible to think that we object to inequality between any two groups for its own sake. How can we get from this starting-point to the conclusion that we should assess inequality only in terms of its effect on the worst off? (pp. 32–3)

If we accept transitivity in normative reasoning, then I have shown how we can complete Barry's argument and, hence, why the maximin (or leximin) principle is an extremely plausible representation of strict moderate egalitarianism.[23]

There is another way of establishing an interesting link between equality promotion and the leximin principle and that is by imposing a separability condition on the betterness relation.[24] This condition demands that the level of well-being of indifferent people should not influence our ranking of the alternatives. To appeal to separability might seem like a strange move within an egalitarian framework since it is obvious that our ranking of various alternatives with respect to inequality will depend on the level of well-being of indifferent people. But I will argue otherwise.

First, we should notice that we have already accepted a certain degree of separability in the betterness relation by endorsing the principle of personal good. By way of illustration, consider the alternatives $x = (5, t, t)$ and $y = (10, t, t)$. The betterness ranking of x and y is independent of the value of t within a moderate egalitarian framework. Compare this to a ranking of x and y with respect to equality, where it is obvious that the value of t matters; x is more equal than y when $t \leq 5$ and y is more equal than x when $t \geq 10$. Hence, the real issue is not whether we should accept any separability at all within moderate egalitarianism, but rather to what extent we should accept separability in the betterness relation.

Strong separability demands that we also solve distributive conflicts in a way that is independent of the well-being of indifferent people. In order to define this condition formally, let M denote a subgroup of total population N and $\bar{M}$ the rest of the population.

Strong Separability: For all alternatives x, y, z, w, if (1) for every person $j \in M$, j has the same utility level in x as in z and in y as in w, and (2) for every

[23] This line of reasoning is inspired by the work of Hammond (1976, 1979), who was the first to show how an objection to inequality between any two groups leads to maximin. I will return to Hammond's result shortly.

[24] This topic is in fact of much practical importance because a separable betterness relation makes possible a decomposable approach to policy considerations. Foster and Sen (1997) discuss this issue at some length, but remark that "even if one accepts the *usefulness* of decomposability, one might still wonder about its *acceptability* as a general condition" (p. 156). See also the discussion of separability in Section 5.

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person $j \in \bar{M}$, j has the same utility level in x as in y and in z as in w, then x is better than y if and only if z is better than w.

As an illustration, consider an example suggested by Broome (2001). We have four alternatives $c = (2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2)$, $d = (4, 1, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2)$, $e = (2, 2, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1)$, and $f = (4, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1)$. If the betterness relation satisfies strong separability, then we know that c is better than d if and only if e is better than f. However, if we want to solve these conflicts by giving strict priority to equality promotion, then it might seem as though we have to abandon the demand for strong separability. In this example it is obvious that c is more equal than e and, hence, one might think that it is futile, *within an egalitarian framework*, to demand consistency in the way we rank c to d and e to f.

However, I will argue that this is not the case. We may defend a version of moderate egalitarianism along the lines suggested by Nagel (1979, 1991), where we seek a result which is acceptable to each person involved.

> Oddly enough, egalitarianism is based on a more obscure conception of moral equality than either of the less egalitarian theories. . . . Something close to unanimity is being invoked. . . . The essence of such a criterion is to try in a moral assessment to include each person's point of view separately, so as to achieve a result which is in a significant sense acceptable to each person involved or affected. (Nagel, 1979, pp. 116–23)

Given this framework, we can safely ignore the indifferent people and, moreover, we may argue that conflicts should be solved by assigning strict priority to equality promotion *within the group of people involved in the conflict*. In order to state this in a slightly more formal manner, let us for any two alternatives x and y define x^y as the truncated version of x where we have deleted every person being indifferent between x and y. Hence, as an example, if $x = (1, 4, 6, 10, 15)$ and $y = (1, 9, 12, 13, 15)$, then $x^y = (4, 6, 10)$ and $y^x = (9, 12, 13)$.

Strict Priority to Equality Promotion Within the Group of People Involved in the Conflict: For all alternatives x and y, if (1) there are persons with higher well-being in x than y and persons with higher well-being in y than x, and (2) x^y is more equal than y^x, then x is better than y.

This condition, together with the principle of personal good, imposes strong separability on the betterness relation. Hence, it is possible to combine an a priori demand for strong separability with a version of moderate egalitarianism. Of course, to appeal to equality promotion within a group is certainly not the same as to appeal to equality promotion in society at large, but, at the same time, it is clearly an egalitarian perspective. It does not appeal to anything other than equality promotion within the group of people involved in the distributive conflict.

Consider now any two-person conflict. It is quite obvious that equality is promoted between the worse off and the better off by giving absolute

priority to the worse off and, hence, strict priority to equality promotion within the group of people involved in the conflict implies the following condition on the betterness relation suggested by Hammond (1976, 1979).

The Hammond Equity Condition: For all alternatives x and y, if there exist j and k such that (1) the well-being level of j is strictly lower in x than y, (2) the well-being level of k is strictly higher in x than y, (3) j has a strictly higher well-being level than k in x, and (4) the utility of everyone else is the same in x and v, then x is better than y.

To illustrate the condition, consider $x = (1, 3, 7, 8)$, $y = (1, 3, 6, 9)$. Hammond equity implies that x is better than y, and it is easily seen that this promotes equality within the group of people involved in the distributive conflict. $x^y = (7, 8)$ is clearly more equal than $y^x = (6, 9)$ (which also follows from strong conditional contracting extremes on equality).

As shown by Hammond, this is all we need to characterize the leximin principle within our framework. Notice that the fact that we aim at promoting equality within the group of people involved in a conflict does not imply that we do not value overall equality. Within such a framework we only have to argue that overall equality is of secondary importance. The essential part of this perspective is to aim at acceptability within the group of people involved in the conflict, and we do that better by focusing on equality promotion within this group than by promoting overall equality (if these two aims should ever be in conflict!).

Both in philosophy and economics, there has been considerable concern about how to combine egalitarian reasoning with a concern for the utilitarian perspective.[25] Of course, egalitarians do not want to embrace the utilitarian betterness relation, but they may find the following principle appealing.

Weak Utilitarianism: If one alternative has more total utility than another, it is better in one respect.

If we endorse weak utilitarianism, then we need to clarify how to balance a concern for equality with a concern for total well-being. Before entering into the problem of balancing, though, I believe there is a more fundamental question to be asked. If you are an *egalitarian*, *why* should you care about utilitarian reasoning *at all*? If we read Parfit (1995) on this it becomes clear that he does not make a distinction between the principle of personal good and utilitarian reasoning.

> Suppose next that the people in some community could all be either (1) equally well off, or (2) equally badly off. The [weak] Principle of Equality does not tell us that (2) would be worse. This principle is about the badness

[25] By introducing utilitarianism, I do not impose a particular interpretation of the concept of well-being. Here, my concern is the idea of assigning value to the total amount of well-being.

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> of inequality; and, though it would be clearly worse if everyone were equally worse off, or ground for thinking this cannot be egalitarian.
>
> To explain why (2) would be worse, we might appeal to [weak utilitarianism] . . . When people would be on average better off, or receive a greater net sum of benefits, we can say, for short, that there would be more [*well-being*] . . . If we cared only about equality, we would be *Pure* Egalitarians. If we cared only about [well-being], we would be Pure Utilitarians – or what is normally called Utilitarians. But most of us accept a *pluralist* view: one that appeals to more than one principle or value. (p. 4)

When comparing (1) and (2) in Parfit's example it would be sufficient to appeal to the principle of personal good. Parfit, on the other hand, defends (1) by appealing to weak utilitarianism. That is unfortunate because there is a fundamental difference between these two principles. Anyone ought to accept the principle of personal good, whereas weak utilitarianism is more controversial. Actually, many egalitarians seem to reject utilitarian reasoning altogether, and on this basis they might think that they should reject a pluralistic egalitarian theory as well. This is suggested by McKerlie (1994).[26]

> And those egalitarians who believe that there is something fundamentally wrong with the kind of thinking done by the utilitarian principle would not be willing to include it (or any other principle formally like it) in the combined view. (p. 27)

Notice that this does not only mean that one should reject the utilitarian betterness relation but also that one should argue that there is something wrong even with weak utilitarianism. These egalitarians do not see any value in the total amount of utility in society; it is simply an irrelevant aspect of the situation. However, as I have shown, egalitarians do not have to include utilitarian reasoning in order to have a workable theory. It is sufficient that they accept the principle of personal good.

This is not to say that weak utilitarianism ought to be rejected by egalitarians. As illustrated by Kymlicka (1988), it might be defended as a way of expressing moral equality. And it could be the case that some egalitarians want to combine these two ways of expressing moral equality (see for example Nagel, 1979, p. 122).[27] Moreover, other egalitarians may want to include utilitarian reasoning even though they reject it as an expression of moral equality, arguing that the appropriate expression of moral equality is not the only value of importance.

[26] See also McKerlie (1994, fn. 5).

[27] On the other hand, Nagel (1991, p. 78) rejects the idea that utilitarianism represents a reasonable expression of the moral equality of people. Be that as it may. Our concern is to see how these two approaches can be combined, if people find such a framework attractive.

Let *weak moderate egalitarianism* be the name of the set of positions that combine a concern for equality with a concern for total well-being. This framework allows for a number of specific approaches, though the nature of these approaches depends on our interpretation of the previous characterization of the leximin principle. If we endorse my favourite interpretation and acknowledge that the leximin principle always promotes equality (in distributive conflicts), then a weak moderate egalitarian would simply be someone who weighed the utilitarian and the leximin argument (that is, weighed the mean and the well-being of the worst off). There would be no reason to allow for other weighting schemes, because in this case we think that the leximin principle captures all there is to say about equality promotion. On the other hand, if we think that the leximin principle is an imperfect framework for equality promotion, then we might consider alternative approaches tenable when aiming at combining equality promotion with utilitarian reasoning.

Usually, economists have taken the Pigou–Dalton criterion of transfer as the point of departure for a discussion of moderate egalitarianism.[28]

The Pigou–Dalton Principle of Transfer: For all alternatives x and y, if there exist j and k such that (1) the well-being gain of j is equal to the well-being loss of k when moving from y to x (2) j has a lower well-being level than k in x, and (4) the utility of everyone else is the same in x and y, then x is better than y.

Many economists consider this condition the defining feature of an egalitarian betterness relation (see, for example, Lambert, 1993, p. 57). The claim is that the condition captures a set of cases where it should be uncontroversial to give the upper hand to the weak principle of equality. The total amount of well-being is unchanged and, hence, there seems to be no counterargument to equality promotion. Of course, the premise for all this is that equality decreases in these cases which have been considered uncontroversial by economists.

> The Pigou–Dalton transfer principle is egalitarian, in the sense that any transfer from a poorer to a richer person must be seen as an increase in inequality and regarded as a worsening. (Sen and Foster, 1997, p. 145) [29]

In contrast, Temkin (1993) urges a revision of the Pigou–Dalton principle in order to make it part of an egalitarian framework and, moreover, claims that "[m]ost economists seem to have been unaware of PD's serious limitations" (p. 84). What does Temkin have in mind?

[28] Often, and originally, this condition is stated in the space of income (see Dalton, 1920, p. 352), but for our purpose it is appropriate to express it in the space of well-being. See Sen and Foster (1997) for further discussion and definitions.

[29] To talk about transfer of well-being should not be interpreted literally. It simply means, as stated in the Pigou–Dalton principle, that the gain for one person when moving from one to another alternative is equal to the loss for another person.

Temkin's criticism seems to be based on a misunderstanding of the work of economists. The two cases that really worry Temkin are cases where we have a reversal of the relative positions of the two persons affected by the transfer (p. 82) and cases where the total amount of well-being is affected by the transfer (pp. 77–82). But none of these cases are covered by the Pigou–Dalton criterion, as should be clear by the presentation in Dalton (1920, p. 351). This is well-known among economists and, hence, the condition is sometimes presented in a rather sloppy manner. A case in point is the above quote from Sen and Foster (1997) which might cause some confusion. Temkin (1993, p. 77) and other philosophers use the word "transfer" somewhat differently from economists. Economists think of a transfer situation as a case where the total amount of well-being (or income) is the same, whereas philosophers work with both efficient and inefficient transfers that cover cases where the total amount of well-being differs. As a consequence, Temkin interprets the Pigou–Dalton criterion as saying in general that if the well-being of the worse off increases and the better off decreases then there is equality promotion (see pp. 82–3). But that is not the Pigou–Dalton principle; it is the Hammond Equity condition introduced earlier.

However, Temkin's analysis gives some insight into the controversial aspect of the Pigou–Dalton condition. The problem with the Pigou–Dalton principle is that it only focuses on the narrowing of the gap between the persons involved in the transfer. No one can reject that such a transfer reduces the inequality between these two, as we have already discussed in relation to the Hammond equity condition. But, at the same time, it may increase the gap between others in society. Hence, if we care about promoting *overall* equality in the distribution and not only equality between the two persons involved in the conflict, then we may question the condition. Consider the following case, where we evaluate $x = (1, 50, 100)$ and $y = (1, 75, 75)$. Surely, there is complete equality among the two better off in y. But, at the same time, the transfer has caused an increase in inequality between the worst off and the second worst off. When evaluating overall equality, are we sure that this increase in equality is outweighed by the decrease in equality among the two better off? Of course, one way of defending the Pigou–Dalton condition is to say that the increase in inequality between the two worse off is actually outweighed by the decrease in inequality between the worst off and the best of. As is easily seen, the reduction in distance between the best off and the worst off is equal to the increase in distance between the worst off and the second worst off. This is no coincidence, it is a generic feature of the kind of transfers captured by the Pigou–Dalton condition. But it is not obvious to me how we should evaluate these two effects when we look at *overall* inequality. It might be the case that our main concern from this perspective is the isolation of the worst off at the bottom of the distribution in y. If so,

then we may question the Pigou–Dalton condition. And I do not find such a view entirely implausible, even though my own view is more in line with the conventional view within economics (which can also be defended on the basis of Nagel's perspective as discussed earlier).

Even if we accept the Pigou–Dalton principle as a prerequisite for any egalitarian betterness relation, as I will do in the rest of the paper, we should notice that this condition allows for a very broad interpretation of the set of egalitarian betterness relations. There are betterness relations within this framework that do not pay very much attention to equality promotion. The most extreme case would be what I will name quasi-egalitarian utilitarianism, which *only* assigns weight to equality considerations when the total amount of well-being is the same in society. In all other cases, it follows the utilitarian betterness relation. This approach satisfies the Pigou–Dalton principle, but for all practical purposes it is a utilitarian approach. Of course, if we demand a continuous betterness relation, then we exclude this approach and the leximin principle (which is the other extreme of moderate egalitarianism).

In general, the four main categories of egalitarianism can be portrayed as illustrated in Table 1.

How do we move from this set of egalitarian betterness relations to a conclusion in a particular ranking of alternatives if we do not assign absolute priority to equality promotion or utilitarian reasoning? One possibility is to work with a single weak moderate egalitarian betterness relation, but the more prominent approach within economics has been to look for the possibility of establishing results that are valid for a broad range of moderate egalitarian betterness relations. This approach is sometimes called the intersection (or dominance) approach. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review this literature (see Sen and Foster, 1997). But I should like to end this section by providing some comments on Temkin's (1993) criticism of this approach.[30]

> The preceding considerations suggest a general and deep problem facing the intersection approach. The problem . . . is that often an intersection approach will fail to yield an ordering when an ordering should be yielded, and this may be so even in cases where it is quite clear what the correct ordering is . . . The problem with the intersections is they don't allow trade-offs . . . It is no doubt true that sometimes when different facets of a multifaceted notion point in different directions a ranking cannot be expected to emerge. But it by no means follows that *whenever* different facets of a multifaceted notion point in different directions a meaningful ranking cannot emerge . . . Central to the approach I have been advocating is that it will involve precisely the sort of trade-offs precluded by the intersection approach. Thus, before rendering

[30] Temkin (1993) discusses the intersection approach in the context of inequality measurement, but his arguments seem to apply more generally. In any case, my comments are equally relevant for both inequality and betterness evaluations.

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Kind of egalitarianism	Important properties of the betterness relation	Justification
Strong egalitarianism	Violates the principle of personal good.	The value of equality makes you go against the principle of personal good.
Strict moderate egalitarianism	The leximin betterness relation. Discontinuous. Satisfies the principle of personal good, the Pigou–Dalton principle, and strong separability.	Denies that the value of equality sometimes makes you go against the principle of personal good. Assigns strict priority to equality promotion in case of conflict.
Weak moderate egalitarianism	Continuous. Satisfies the principle of personal good and the Pigou–Dalton principle. May satisfy strong separability, but not necessarily.	Denies that the value of equality sometimes makes you go against the principle of personal good. Endorses both the weak principle of equality and the weak principle of utility, without assigning strict priority to either of the two principles.
Quasi-egalitarian utilitarianism	Is equivalent to the utilitarian betterness relation, except for cases where there is an equal amount of total well-being in both alternatives. Then it ranks the more equal alternative as better. Discontinuous. Satisfies the principle of personal good and the Pigou–Dalton principle. May satisfy strong separability, but not necessarily.	Denies that the value of equality sometimes makes you go against the principle of personal good. Endorses both the weak principle of equality and the weak principle of utility, but assigns strict priority to weak utilitarianism.

TABLE 1. Egalitarian positions

a final judgment as to how two alternatives compare, such an approach will take into account the number and relative significance of the aspects supporting possible judgments as well as the degree to which the different aspects support those judgments. (pp. 144–50)

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However, to defend trade-offs is not in conflict with the idea of the intersection approach. "Intersection quasi-orderings are based on *unanimity* according to a given set of criteria" (Sen and Foster, 1997, p. 132). Hence, if we agree on how to make trade-offs between different aspects of a situation, then the intersection approach tells us to extend the incomplete ranking to these cases as well. Thus, the framework advocated by Temkin (1993) is already part of the intersection approach applied by economists, and hence the intersection approach does not face a general and deep problem. However, the intersection approach should be applied with care, because sometimes we may include in the analysis betterness relations that do not have (or demand) any support and hence we may end up with too incomplete a ranking. But that is a different story.[31]

5. PRIORITARIANISM AND SUFFICIENCY

Consider again the case where there is a conflict between the best off and the worst off in society. In order to promote *equality*, we have to assign absolute priority to the worst off in all these cases. And the reason for this is that the other person involved in the conflict is *the best off*. Hence, it is independent of whether the best off lives in extreme destitution or has a very good life. But I assume that most people think otherwise. I believe most people find it much harder to assign absolute priority to the worst off if both live in destitution. In other words, most of us take into account the *absolute* circumstances of people when evaluating to what extent to assign priority to the worse off in a distributive conflict.

Roughly speaking, this is the message of prioritarians. And it is an important one. It highlights the fact that there are different ways of *justifying* any distributive principle we impose on the betterness relation. Still, the fact that the absolute circumstances of people affect our evaluations is not news to economists or philosophers and, hence, we may wonder why prioritarianism has been considered with so much interest in recent philosophical debate. In order to answer this question, it will be useful to have a brief look at how prioritarianism has been introduced among philosophers. The most prominent contribution on prioritarianism is Parfit (1995), who defines the approach as follows.[32]

The Priority View: Benefiting people matters more the worse off these people are.

However, as Parfit (1995) remarked himself, the definition is imprecise because it does not clearly distinguish prioritarianism from egalitarianism.

[31] I have explored this issue in relation to poverty measurement in Tungodden (2001).

[32] Weirich (1983) is an early philosophical discussion of formal rules capturing the prioritarian intuition.

> But this claim by itself, does not define a different view, since it would be made by all Egalitarians. If we believe that we should aim for equality, we shall think it more important to benefit those who are worse off. Such benefits reduce inequality. If that is why we give such benefits priority, we do not hold the Priority View. On this view, as I define it here, we do *not* believe in equality. We give priority to the worse off, not because this will reduce inequality, but for other reasons. (p. 22)

Even if you give priority to the worse off, you do not necessarily hold the priority view according to Parfit's definition. What matters is *why* you give priority.[33] In other words, Parfit does not define the distinction between egalitarianism and prioritarianism by different ways of restricting the betterness relation, but by different ways of justifying any principle imposed on the betterness relation. This again illustrates the importance of making a distinction between the two levels of justification outlined in Section 2.

Prioritarianism can be defended in a negative and a positive way. The positive approach is to defend prioritarianism on its own, that is, to show that it captures an important point of view when reasoning about principles to impose on the betterness relation. The negative approach is to defend it by showing that it represents one way of escaping a number of problems facing standard egalitarian justification. Much of the philosophical literature applies the negative approach. By way of illustration, when Parfit (1995, p. 34) summarizes his discussion on egalitarianism and prioritarianism, he introduces the priority view as an option that we can move to when we realize the problems facing the egalitarian approach to distributive justice.[34]

What problems of justification do we then avoid when moving from egalitarianism to prioritarianism? First, Parfit (1995, p. 22) suggests that it is an advantage that prioritarianism can be considered a complete moral view, in contrast to any plausible version of egalitarianism that ought to be combined with another principle. This fact is also pointed at by McKerlie (1994, p. 27): "some egalitarians regret the fact that the equality view must be combined with another principle. They want a simpler alternative to utilitarianism, and they object to the intuitive nature of the judgments we must make in weighing the reasons provided by the two principles

[33] This should, of course, have been reflected in the naming and definition of the positions in this debate. A more reasonable labelling (than egalitarianism and prioritarianism) would be to make a distinction between relative and absolute prioritarianism. In order to avoid any confusion, however, I will stick to the standard labels.

[34] However, it should also be mentioned that Parfit (1995, p. 22) does not deny the possibility of combining egalitarianism and prioritarianism. In my view, this is an option too easily forgotten in the debate on equality versus priority.

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against one another".[35] This seems odd to me. Prioritarianism, as it is stated, is also intuitionist (Parfit, 1995, p. 20) because it does not tell us how much priority to assign to the worse off. Hence, the only difference in this respect is that in the egalitarian case we have to rely on intuition when justifying the trade-off we make between different principles, whereas in the prioritarian case we have to rely on intuition when justifying any particular interpretation of the principle of priority. And I cannot see that this distinction is significant.

Second, Parfit (1995, p. 23) stresses that by endorsing the priority view we avoid the levelling down objection. Certainly, on the basis of a concern for the absolute circumstances of people, there is nothing to be gained by reducing the level of well-being of the better off. But I have already argued against the importance of the levelling down objection and, hence, in my view, this move should not count for much.

Finally, as we have seen in the previous section, many philosophers have been reluctant to include utilitarian reasoning in their justification of any particular betterness relation. In this respect, they have considered the prioritarian approach more appropriate than weak moderate egalitarianism because it allows for a different way of justifying a concern for gains and losses of the better off. Eventually, gains and losses are included in the prioritarian framework if we do not assign infinitely more importance to improving the *absolute* circumstances of poorer people than better-off people, and not, as in utilitarianism, because we care about the *total* level of well-being. This is, in my view, an interesting argument, and it has not been properly recognized by economists. Economists have tended to assume that any betterness relation that can be represented as the outcome of a trade-off between a concern for utility and equality necessarily rests partly on utilitarian justification. Prioritarianism shows that this need not be the case. And even though economists certainly have realized that there is an alternative representation of such betterness relations that avoids any reference to total utility, to wit by a social welfare function defined directly on individual well-being, I think it is fair to say that economists have not acknowledged that this formulation may invite an alternative justification of the way we restrict the betterness relation.

More importantly, economists have not seen that this formulation may also invite an alternative justification of our concern for the worse off. The standard view has been that any betterness relation that can be represented as the outcome of a trade-off between a concern for utility and equality necessarily reflects a concern for equality (see, for example, Foster and Sen (1997, p. 123)). Hence, even though economists have been aware of the fact that we may care about both the absolute and relative

[35] Of course, this is only the case of weak moderate egalitarianism. See also Rawls (1971, pp. 34–40).

circumstances of the worse off, they have not considered how these aspects may constitute different modes of justification. Prioritarianism, however, shows that this is the case. Thus, in my view, the main contribution of prioritarianism is not the introduction of a completely new idea (that absolute circumstances should count in distributive reasoning has been suggested by many), but the clarification of how this idea constitutes a distinctive way of justifying a concern for the worse off.[36] And I consider this a positive reason for adopting the prioritarian perspective. Prioritarian justification of priority to the worse off is essential in its own right, and not only as a way of (possibly) escaping problems facing egalitarian reasoning.

This is most clearly seen if we consider a set of cases where the economists certainly have recognized that justification of priority to the worse off cannot be based on purely egalitarian grounds, even in combination with utilitarian reasoning. The cases I have in mind are those that include an *absolute poverty line.* Most of us recognize the special importance of improving the lives of poor people and, hence, should like to include this in our scheme of justification (Raz, 1986, p. 240). However, in order to do that, we need to adopt prioritarian reasoning.

It has been argued by some philosophers that an absolute threshold is all that matters in distributive reasoning. In particular, Frankfurt (1987, p. 22) suggests *the doctrine of sufficiency*:[37] "If everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others" (p. 21). Hence, according to Frankfurt, we should assign priority to those below this sufficiency threshold in a conflict with people who have enough, but there is no reason to assign priority to the worse off among people who have enough.[38] Even though this is

[36] We may say the same about Sen's capability approach (see Sen, 1985). Over the years, many people have argued for similar views, but they have not clearly shown that such an argument could constitute a distinct perspective on our understanding of the notion of well-being and how it relates to other views. And that I believe was the main contribution – and an important one – of Sen's work.

[37] For a critical discussion of Frankfurt's argument, see Goodin (1987).

[38] Related views have been expressed by (among others) Anderson (1999) and Hausman (2001). Anderson argues that "democratic equality guarantees not effective access to equal levels of functioning but effective access to levels of functioning, sufficient to stand as an equal in society" (p. 318), and in a similar vein Hausman claims that "[a] concern with equality of moral status supports a limited prioritarianism . . . not . . . complete equalizing" (p. 6). Among these writers there seems to be the view that to appeal to complete equality causes a distraction in moral action and reasoning (see also Rosenberg, 1995), which is most explicitly expressed by Frankfurt (1989). "In this way the doctrine of equality contributes to the moral disorientation and shallowness of our time" (p. 23). There are many possible interpretations of such a claim, but, in any case, this cannot be launched as an argument against *prioritarianism*! Equality is not the aim of this approach and, thus, the

not usually considered a prioritarian doctrine, I believe it highlights an essential issue within prioritarianism, namely, to what extent an absolute threshold should affect our justification of priority to the worse off.

The sufficiency approach faces at least two challenges.[39] First, it needs to explain what it means that someone has enough.[40] Second, we need to know why we should only assign priority to those below the sufficiency threshold. As I see it, there are two ways of understanding the idea of having enough. One is to argue that there is this feeling of contentment (or absence of distress) which can be satisfied with a certain amount of money, and which we can argue should be included as a need in an expanded version of the idea of an absolute poverty line. [41] The other interpretation, relying on Frankfurt's claim that reasonable people ought to feel content at a certain level of well-being, is moral and is that there is no reason (from a person's point of view) to object to unequal distributions of well-being as long as that person has enough. In other words, the sufficiency level defines the level of well-being above which there is no reason to complain.

If we accept the latter definition, it follows directly that we should pay no attention to people above the sufficiency level in a distributive conflict. Arneson (2000), Nagel (1991, p. 81), Temkin (2003) clearly reject such a view on distributive justice, and, in my view, a more plausible reading of an absolute threshold is that it represents a level of well-being where there is a fundamental change in the moral significance of people's claims in a distributive conflict. This does not rule out a concern for people above the absolute threshold, and it does not rule out the possibility of assigning priority to the worse off within this group.

Of course, it is not easy to draw any such line, and in that respect it is important to notice the work of economists on fuzzy poverty lines.[42] But I believe that most people share the intuition that there is a fundamental

criticism should not apply. Moreover, notice that to say that it is of particular importance to guarantee everyone a certain level of well-being is different from saying that this is *all* that matters, an issue I return to below.

[39] See also Crisp (2000), who outlines a version of sufficiency based on the notion of compassion.

[40] Rosenberg (1995) argues that "[o]perationalizing sufficiency is probably far easier than establishing equal shares" (p. 66). Surely, it is hard to operationalize the ideal of equality, but in order to compare this task with the doctrine of sufficiency we have to determine what it means that someone has enough. Hence, a priori, it is hard to say whether the need for a practical standard counts in favour of a doctrine of sufficiency or not.

[41] The inclusion of the feeling of contentment in the definition of an absolute threshold may cause a relative threshold in the space of income (as pointed out more generally in Sen, 1983). See also Rosenberg (1995), who defends the doctrine of sufficiency on the basis of an idea about what is the "real interests" (p. 67) of a person.

[42] Again, see Sen and Foster (1997, p. 188–91) for an overview.

difference in the complaints of a person living in destitution and the complaints of a person living a good life. We may say that this illustrates a case where the better-off person has enough (in order to fulfill all important needs) and, hence, where we assign strong (maybe absolute) priority to the poor person (without rejecting the relevance of the claim of the better-off person).

In sum, I believe that the notion of an absolute threshold is of fundamental importance and that it represents the most important reason for including the prioritarian point of view within any reasonable moral conception of the distributive problem. Of course, it is hard to determine how much more importance to assign to the needs of a poor person in a conflict with a person above the threshold. But I think that this particular aspect of prioritarianism is fairly well-recognized by economists (even though some economists will insist on a purely relative notion of poverty), and that the more fundamental lesson learned by the recent contribution of prioritarian philosophers is that our concern for the absolute circumstances of people can be expanded to a more general theory of justification (as suggested by Nagel (1991, pp. 69–70) among others).

So far I have mainly talked about prioritarianism and the sufficiency approach as ways of justifying a concern for the worse off. Let me now comment on how prioritarian justification restricts the betterness relation. First, it should be clear that any prioritarian betterness relation needs to satisfy the principle of personal good and the Pigou–Dalton principle. The essence of prioritarianism is to improve the absolute circumstances of people (which implies endorsement of the principle of good) and moreover to assign more priority to the worse off on the basis of absolute circumstances (which implies the endorsement of the Pigou–Dalton principle). It may be worthwhile to stress that the Pigou–Dalton principle is an *unquestionable* restriction on a prioritarian betterness relation, because the level of well-being of indifferent people is of no importance when assigning priority on the basis of the absolute circumstances of people. Hence, as an illustration, a rank order weighting scheme (like the Gini-based ranking rule) cannot be part of a purely prioritarian betterness relation. More generally, it implies that any prioritarian betterness relation must be strongly *separable.*

Prioritarian betterness relations may differ in two respects, namely, in the importance they attach to the absolute threshold and the extent of the priority they assign to the worse off in general. Let us define restricted prioritarianism as the position that captures prioritarian betterness relations assigning absolute priority to the improvements of the lives of people below an absolute threshold, and moderate prioritarianism as the position capturing prioritarian betterness relations that do not assign absolute priority to the worse off in general. It should be stressed that restricted prioritarianism also assigns some priority to the worse off in

Kind of prioritarianism	Important properties of the betterness relation	Justification
Strict prioritarianism	The leximin betterness relation. Discontinuous. Satisfies the principle of personal good, the Pigou–Dalton principle, and strong separability.	Considers it good to improve the absolute circumstances of people. Considers it strictly more important to improve the absolute circumstances of the worse off.
Restricted moderate prioritarianism	Gives absolute priority to people below an absolute threshold. Discontinuous. Satisfies the principle of personal good, the Pigou–Dalton principle, and strong separability.	Considers it good to improve the absolute circumstances of people. Considers it strictly more important to improve the absolute circumstances of people below an absolute threshold.
Unrestricted moderate prioritarianism	Continuous. Satisfies the principle of personal good, the Pigou–Dalton principle, and strong separability.	Considers it good to improve the absolute circumstances of people. Considers it more important to improve the absolute circumstances of the worse off, but not strictly more.
Quasi-prioritarian utilitarianism	Is equivalent to the utilitarian betterness relation, except for cases where there is an equal amount of total well-being in both alternatives. Then it assigns priority to the worse off. Discontinuous. Satisfies the principle of personal good, the Pigou–Dalton principle, and strong separability.	Considers it strictly more important to increase total well-being than to assign priority to the worse off.

TABLE 2. Prioritarian positions

cases involving only people above the absolute threshold; in other words, they satisfy the Pigou–Dalton principle.

Let us compare egalitarianism and prioritarianism on the basis of Table 1 and Table 2. First, we should notice that there is no prioritarian position

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equivalent to strong egalitarianism due to the fact that all prioritarian betterness relations satisfy the principle of personal good. Second, strict prioritarianism is by definition the leximin principle, whereas it is somewhat more controversial to claim that strict moderate egalitarianism can be captured by this principle (though I have suggested that we should think so). Finally, prioritarianism includes two intermediate classes, which reflects the possibility of assigning absolute priority to people below an absolute threshold within prioritarian reasoning.

Second, the comparison of Table 1 and Table 2 should also underline that an egalitarian position and a prioritarian position potentially differ in two respects; first, in the way it restricts the betterness relation and, second, in the way it justifies the restrictions imposed on the betterness relation.[43] But are there betterness relations that cannot be justified both on egalitarian and prioritarians grounds?[44] There are two ways of approaching this question. One is to look for *implausible cases*, the other is to look for *impossible cases*. And not surprisingly, economists have been eager to look for the impossible cases (Broome, 2001; Fleurbaey, 2001), whereas philosophers have been more concerned with the implausible cases (McKerlie, 1994; Parfit, 1995).

Let us look first at the impossible cases. By comparing Table 1 and Table 2, it is easily seen that any betterness relation violating strong separability needs to be justified on the basis of egalitarianism. By way of illustration, compare $x = (1, 4, 4)$, $y = (1, 3, 6)$, $z = (10, 4, 4)$, and $w = (10, 3, 6)$. In this case, suppose that the betterness relation in question states that x is better than y and w is better than z. On the basis of prioritarian justification we cannot support this conclusion, because in order to do that we need to assign importance to the well-being level of indifferent people in our evaluation. As stated in Table 2, any prioritarian betterness relation satisfies strong separability. However, notice that it is not the case that any betterness relation satisfying strong separability ought to be justified on the basis of prioritarian reasoning. As I have argued in Section 4, it is certainly possible to defend a strongly separable betterness relation within egalitarianism.

Is there any prioritarian betterness relation that cannot be defended on the basis of egalitarian reasoning? Fleurbaey (2001) does not think so.

> In short, a prioritarian will always find an egalitarian who advocates the same social ranking. When comparing distributions with the same total amount of benefits, the prioritarian will agree with any egalitarian who measures

[43] See also Arneson (1999, 2000).

[44] Let me underline that I do not consider this issue for cases involving uncertainty; see Fleurbaey (2001) and Broome (2001).

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> inequality with the same index that is implicit in the prioritarian's social ranking. (pp. 8–9)[45]

In evaluating this claim, the real issue is whether any inequality index will do the work within an egalitarian framework. Certainly, if the prioritarian betterness relation assigns absolute priority to people below an absolute threshold, but not absolute priority to the worse off more generally, then it is impossible to defend the index implicit in the ranking as an inequality index that can be established on egalitarian grounds. Leaving the idea of an absolute threshold aside (which is not discussed by Fleurbaey), however, I believe that there are no other cases where we can say that it is impossible to justify a prioritarian betterness relation on the basis of egalitarian reasoning. There may be more cases where this is implausible, but in order to defend such a view one would have to impose further restrictions on our understanding of inequality.

What about the implausible cases more generally? In the philosophical literature, there has been some discussion about the strength of the leximin argument if derived from prioritarian reasoning and not from some version of egalitarianism. The intuition of philosophers like Parfit (1995) and McKerlie (1994) is that the leximin principle is quite implausible as some version of the priority view.

> If we are not concerned with relative levels, why should the smallest benefit to the . . . worst-off person count for infinitely more than much greater benefits to other representative people? (Parfit, 1995, p. 39)

> If the difference principle is a version of the priority view, it is more vulnerable to the intuitive objection. The objection seems to show that, although we might give greater priority to helping the very worst-off, we do not give it absolute priority. We think that a small gain for them can be morally outweighed by a much larger gain for others who are also badly-off. (McKerlie, 1994, p. 33)

It is clear that within the egalitarian framework, we can derive the leximin principle from a set of first principles and thereby avoid intuitionism (Rawls, 1971, p. 34), whereas, as I see it, prioritarian defence of the leximin principle has to be based on intuitive reasoning.[46] That

[45] Roughly speaking, Brown (2003) and Jensen (2003) use the essence of this observation to suggest that prioritarians may also face the levelling down objection. But, this is in my view, to conflate the positions on the basis of the fact that they provide support for the same betterness relation. The prioritarian mode of justification does not face the levelling down objection even if it supports the same betterness relation as a theory of justification that faces the levelling down objection (to wit, egalitarianism).

[46] Of course, we could imagine deriving leximin from general principles introduced within prioritarianism, but I find it hard to see how this should be done. See also Arneson (1999).

is an important difference, and it might be the case that our intuitions undermine the prioritarian justification of the leximin principle.

In any case, I believe that this discussion of implausible cases points at the most fundamental concern in distributive reasoning, to wit, *how much* priority to assign to the worse off. On this issue we find strong practical political disagreement, and not on the question about whether we should adopt a separable or non-separable perspective. This is not to say that it is unimportant to clarify the different possible modes of justification. But I think that this exercise is of particular importance if it can guide us on the essential question about how much priority to assign to the worse off.

Some economists prefer the intersection approach and the Pigou–Dalton condition represents the basis for an intersection approach that includes both the moderate egalitarian perspective and the prioritarian perspective. This is, of course, a very conservative framework that pays attention to all possible positions. And maybe we have been too anxious to move beyond this framework and use intuitive reasoning in order to arrive at a narrower set of plausible positions. If so, then it might be the case that the distinction between moderate egalitarianism and prioritarianism is important because it provides us with different intuitions about how much priority to assign to the worse off. It might be the case that egalitarian intuitions support much more priority to the worse off than prioritarian intuition. I am not sure. But I believe this to be a possibility worthy of reflection.

6. NON-AGGREGATIVE REASONING

So far I have suggested that the leximin principle can be defended on the basis of equality promotion or as an intuition about how much priority to assign to the worse off within prioritarianism. In this section I will look at a third way of defending this principle, by taking as the point of departure that we want to avoid aggregative reasoning. I find the non-aggregative perspective particularly interesting because it highlights the fact that aggregation is an issue that should be treated independently of the question of how much priority to assign to the worse off. It is easy to overlook this fact and, therefore, reject non-aggregation on the wrong premises. The non-aggregative claim is that the numbers should not count (Taurek, 1977), and *not* that we should assign absolute priority to the worse off. Maybe some readers find non-aggregation equally implausible as assigning absolute priority to the worse off. But, as we shall see, there are interesting arguments supporting a non-aggregative approach and, thus, we should not reject this perspective out of hand. Hence, in this section I will look at both the grounds of justification and implications of the non-aggregative perspective.

One of the earliest expressions of the non-aggregative perspective was Taurek (1978).

> My way of thinking about these trade-off situations consists, essentially, in seriously considering what will be lost or suffered by this one person if I do not prevent it, and in comparing the significance of that *for him* with what would be lost or suffered by anyone else if I do not prevent it. This reflects a refusal to take seriously in these situations any notion of the sum of two persons' separate losses. . . . The discomfort of each of a large number of individuals experiencing a minor headache does not add up to anyone's experiencing a migraine. In such a trade-off situation as this we are to compare your pain or your loss, not to our collective or total pain, whatever exactly that is supposed to be, but to what would be suffered or lost by *any given single of us*. (pp. 307–8).

Nagel (1979) derives the non-aggregative perspective from the idea that we should seek to establish unanimity about distributive principles on the basis of individual acceptability.

> The main point about a measure of urgency is that it is done by pair-wise comparison of the situations of individuals. The simplest method would be to count *any* improvement in the situation of someone worse off as more urgent than any improvement in the situation of someone better off; but this is not especially plausible. It is more reasonable to accord greater urgency to larger improvements somewhat higher in the scale than to very small improvements lower down. Such a modified principle could still be described as selecting the alternative that was least unacceptable from each point of view. This method can be extended to problems of social choice involving large numbers of people. So long as numbers do not count it remains a type of unanimity criterion, defined by a suitable measure of urgency. (p. 125)[47]

This view is also closely related to the kind of contractualism defended by Scanlon (1982, 1998).[48]

Roughly speaking, we may say that the general perspective of Nagel (and Scanlon) consists of two main arguments. First, that the

[47] See also Nagel (1970, pp. 140–2 and 1979). Nagel acknowledges that it is hard to see that the numbers should not count *at all* when reasoning on distributive conflicts, but he claims that if we accept some kind of aggregation procedure then we cannot endorse this by any appeal to unanimity (1979, p. 125 and 1991, p. 73). See Brink (1993, p. 280) for a rejection of the link between reasonable unanimity and pair-wise comparisons.

[48] But with important differences. First, Scanlon is, in general, more sceptical of a framework that narrows moral considerations to comparisons of distributions of well-being; second, he provides an alternative justification of the need for unanimity; and, third, his focus is more on personal morality than the ethics of distribution in general (see also Nagel, 1999).

Moreover, notice that Scanlon's (1982) contractarian perspective differs somewhat from his (1998) view; see Reibetanz (1998). I will not make any attempt to see how our discussion relates to the particularities of each of these different non-aggregative positions.

non-aggregative approach is the most legitimate distributive perspective because it comes closest to our demand for unanimity among reasonable people. It supports the alternative that is least unacceptable to the person to whom it is most unacceptable. Second, that a measure of individual acceptability should take into account both the level of well-being and the gains or losses for a person.

But is there any consistent non-aggregative betterness relation that can include this view on individual acceptability? Again, I will consider the question within a framework where we accept transitivity.

Let us start by stating the non-aggregative condition somewhat more precisely.

Non-Aggregation: For any two alternatives x and y, if there exists a person j such that x is more unacceptable to j than y is to any other person, then y is better than x.[49]

What remains to be done is to clarify how to determine the degree of unacceptability, where our aim should be to present a view that can be justified both on egalitarian and prioritarian grounds. But a solution is at hand, to wit, a simple reformulation of the Pigou–Dalton condition.

The Pigou–Dalton Principle of Unacceptability: For any two alternatives x and y and two persons i and j, if the well-being loss of i is equal to (or greater than) the well-being gain of j when moving from x to y and i is worse off than j in both x and y, then y is more unacceptable to i than x to j.

It is not difficult to show, however, that within this framework, there is no other option than the leximin principle.[50]

Observation: A transitive betterness relation satisfies Non-Aggregation, given the Pigou–Dalton principle of Unacceptability, if and only if it is leximin.

I have not stated this observation formally and, thus, I will only provide an informal discussion of the structure of the proof. Assume that the observation is wrong. In that case, there should exist two alternatives x and y such that x is considered better than y by a betterness relation satisfying the conditions of the observation and, at the same time, the worst off (who is not indifferent) is better off in y than x. I will take as a point of departure a two-person society, but the modification of the proof for the many-person case is trivial. Hence, let us say that $x = (10, 100)$ and $y = (25, 50)$. Now consider two other alternatives, z and w, which are equal to x and y, respectively, except for the fact that there is a number of new people in z and w. I assume three things about these new people. First, they have the same level of well-being in z and w. Second, they have a well-being level which is higher than the well-being level of the worst off in x and y and lower than the well-being level of the best off in y.

[49] See also Brink (1993), Glannon (1995, p. 447) and Reibetanz (1998, p. 300).

[50] Notice that we do not even have to invoke the principle of personal good in order to establish this argument.

Third, the number of new people can be chosen freely. In our example let $z = (10, 100, 40, 40, 40, 40)$ and $w = (25, 50, 40, 40, 40, 40)$. According to the Pigou–Dalton principle of acceptability the new people cannot influence our evaluation. Hence, z is better than w. Let z be the status quo and redistribute in steps where each step is a two-person conflict between the best off and one of the new persons in z. Do this until each of the newcomers and the best off loses less than the worst off by a move to w. As an illustration, the first step in our example could be to move from z to the distribution $(10, 90, 50, 40, 40, 40)$. Each such step is endorsed by the Pigou–Dalton principle of unacceptability and, hence, by transitivity, the new alternative, in our case $z^* = (10, 60, 50, 50, 50, 50)$, must be better than w. However, according to the same principle and non-aggregation, w is better than z^*, which shows that the supposition in the first part of this paragraph is not possible.

Hence, if we accept transitivity, then the leximin principle is the only non-aggregative betterness relation that can express a concern for the worse off. Thus, it is not possible to capture Scanlon and Nagel's general suggestion within a consistent framework. As in the case of equality promotion discussed in Section 4, there are several ways of responding to this result (beyond rejecting transitivity).[51] So the result should be interpreted with care. But in my view it provides a very interesting defence of the leximin principle, namely, that leximin is the only reasonable non-aggregative betterness relation which assigns minimal priority to the worse off.

Our result points to another very important issue which is often forgotten. *Any* aggregative approach sometimes allows the interests of the worse off to be out-weighed by the interests of the better off even though each of the better off gains less than the worse off. Actually, I could have stated an even stronger observation (which should be easily seen from the proof) for cases where we do not consider a *fixed* finite population. In this setting, *any* aggregative framework accepts that the interests of the worse off is outweighed by the interests of the better off even though the gain of each of the better off is *infinitesimal*. We may name this the tyranny of aggregation (see also Crisp, 2000; Temkin, 2000b).

Although the tyranny of aggregation is well-known in the context of utilitarianism, it is important to notice that the same argument can be launched against *any* other transitive aggregation betterness relation (independent of how much priority they assign to the worse off). Of course, more people need to gain if the aggregative rule assigns a strong priority

[51] We may revise our view on the condition of unacceptability and, in light of this result, accept that levels are all that matters. Or we may accept that this result shows us that the leximin principle is the best we can do within a transitive framework, but still think that this framework is imperfect, and that it sometimes violates the best account of unacceptability. Finally, we may argue in favour of a broader "second-best analysis", where we allow for the possibility that we sometimes violate the Pigou–Dalton principle of unacceptability.

to the worse off, but that is of secondary importance for our argument. The general problem is that these rules allow the loss of a worse off person to be outweighed by a minimal gain of some number of better-off people. And that is highly questionable, as illustrated in a nice example by Scanlon (1998).[52]

> Suppose that Jones has suffered an accident in the transmitter room of a television station. Electrical equipment has fallen on his arm, and we cannot rescue him without turning off the transmitter for fifteen minutes. A World Cup match is in progress, watched by many people, and it will not be over for an hour. Jones's injury will not get any worse if we wait, but his hand has been mashed and he is receiving extremely painful electrical shocks. Should we rescue him now or wait until the match is over? Does the right thing to do depend on how many people are watching – whether it is one million or five million or a hundred million? It seems to me that we should not wait, no matter how many viewers there are . . . (p. 235)[53]

Does this mean that we should adopt the leximin principle? Maybe, but we should have in mind the well-known tyranny of non-aggregation as well.[54]

> But if the choice is between preventing severe hardship for some who are very poor and deprived, and less severe but still substantial hardship for those who are better off but still struggling for subsistence, then it is very difficult for me to believe that the numbers do not count, and that urgency goes to the worse off however many more there are of the better off. (Nagel, 1979, p. 125)

Of course, the tyranny of non-aggregation could be stated more strongly, by noticing that the leximin principle would demand that any minor improvement in the hardship of the worst off should outweigh any loss of well-being of any other number of people living in destitution. And that is as questionable as the tyranny of aggregation.

Is it possible to adopt some intermediate position? The quotes from Nagel and Scanlon may suggest so. Scanlon illustrates the tyranny of aggregation by looking at a case where (in our context) we may think of

[52] See Temkin (2000b) for an elaborate discussion of this example.

[53] Certainly, this claim is about what we ought to do and, hence, it could be argued that it does not necessarily tell us anything about the goodness of the situations.

[54] In some cases, it seems obvious that the numbers should count, for example, when we choose between saving three or five people. This has caused some worry among the defenders of the non-aggregative approach (see, for example, Sanders, 1988; Kamm, 1993; Scanlon, 1998; Reibetanz, 1998).

However, if we apply transitivity, then this view is not hard to reconcile with a focus on individual reasons. Let x be the case where we save five persons $x_1, x_2, .., x_5$, x^* the case where we only save x_1, x_2, x_3, and y the case where we save three other persons y_1, y_2, y_3. It follows straightforwardly that, on the basis of individual reasons, x should be preferred to x^*, x^* should be equal to y and, hence, from transitivity that x should be preferred to y.

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the people who gain as well-off and the one who is losing as badly off in an absolute sense.[55] On the other hand, Nagel illustrates the tyranny of non-aggregation by looking at an example where all the people involved live in destitution. And I do not think that this is a coincidence, because our strongest intuitions about the tyranny of aggregation is when a minor gain of a large number of people living above an absolute threshold outweighs the losses of a person living below that threshold. And similarly, the tyranny of non-aggregation is most plausible when we look at people who have, roughly speaking, the same living conditions.

Consequently, one solution might be to allow for aggregation within the group of people living below the absolute threshold and within the group of people above the absolute threshold, but to reject aggregation between these two groups. Actually, this is close to the structure of the difference principle suggested by Rawls (1971).

> In any case we are to aggregate to some degree over the expectations of the worst off . . . [The persons in the original position] interpret [the difference principle] from the first as a *limited aggregative principle* and assess it as such in comparison with other standards. It is not as if they agreed to think of the least advantaged as literally the worst-off individual . . . (p. 98, own emphasis)

Rawls acknowledges that "the serious difficulty is how to define the least advantaged group" (1971, p. 98), and he makes some suggestions on a relative threshold. But as I have shown elsewhere (Tungodden, 1999), it is not possible to assign importance to any relative threshold within a transitive framework. Hence, a limited aggregative principle would have to be based on absolute threshold, which of course is a major step away from the standard Rawlsian perspective.

7. TRANSITIVITY

Much of the present discussion has taken place within a framework of consistency that might be contested and, hence, in this section I should like to elaborate somewhat on the a-priori assumption of transitivity. Most people consider transitivity a fundamental part of practical reasoning, but Temkin (1987, 1996, 1999) has argued that there are moral cases which cast doubt on this view.[56] Of particular relevance for our discussion is the argument in Temkin (1987), where egalitarian reasoning enters the stage

[55] Of course, in this example we know nothing about the general level of well-being of these people. We only have information about their level of well-being within the distributive unit of the problem. Moreover, notice that this is not Scanlon's framework. He rejects narrowing these cases to fit the framework of welfarism. Nevertheless, I believe that the example captures the intuition I should like to illustrate. See Norcross (1997) for a general defence of the tyranny of aggregation.

[56] I will not elaborate on alternative consistency requirements and the distinction between choice and evaluation; see Sen (1970, 1986, 1995).

in a discussion of Parfit's mere addition paradox (1984).[57] The paradox combines intuitions about the value of additional lives and the value of equality. Parfit thinks that the paradox illustrates that a particular set of intuitions is irrational, whereas Temkin argues that the lesson should be that we ought to give up any a-priori assumption about a transitive betterness relation.

The argument consists of two steps. First, Temkin claims that egalitarian reasoning produces an intransitivity among the alternatives considered in the paradox. Second, he argues that this intransitivity will be carried over into the betterness relation.

> We have seen that inequality is deeply intransitive . . . Inequality isn't all we care about, nor even, perhaps, what we most care about; but, for many, it is *one* important element of our judgments of preferability. Thus, how situations compare regarding inequality may determine how they compare regarding preferability if 'other things are equal,' or at least 'equal enough.' But then, if inequality is deeply intransitive, it seems likely there are bound to be *some* situations which are equivalent, or nearly equivalent, in terms of the other ideals we care about such that the deep intransitivity of inequality will be carried over into our judgments of preferability . . . *If an important aspect of a complex notion is deeply intransitive, the notion itself will be deeply intransitive*. (1987, p. 153)

Even though the second part of Temkin's argument looks ingenious, it is, in my view, far from trivial. Rather than dwelling on this, however, I will focus on the first part of the argument. Is it really the case that we have to endorse any intransitivity at all on the basis of egalitarian reasoning?

As an illustration of the structure of the mere addition paradox, consider $x = (6)$, $y = (6, 3, 3)$, and $z = (4, 4, 4)$, where person two and person three in y and z are non-existent in x. Obviously, it is not possible to establish an intransitive equality relation in this example. So what is the problem? In order to understand Temkin's argument (1987, p. 147 and Parfit, 1984), let us think of a betterness relation established only on the basis of a concern for equality. Within this framework, Temkin and Parfit argue that we should be indifferent between x and z, consider z better than y, and y not worse than x and, hence, we have established an intransitive betterness relation. Of course, we are not only concerned with considerations of equality and, thus, we will not in any case endorse this betterness relation. But that is where Temkin's second step enters the arena.

Obviously, the most controversial part of this perspective is the claim that when comparing x and y the inequality in y does not matter. How can this be defended? Temkin's argument is as follows:

[57] I will not explain the paradox itself in any detail because the details are not essential for the present discussion. See Parfit (1984), Broome (1996) and Blackorby, Bossert and Donaldson (1997).

> While inequality is normally a bad feature, it does not make an outcome worse if it involves the mere addition of extra people who have lives worth living. (1987, p. 143)

Is it so? Before we answer the question, let me elaborate somewhat on Temkin and Parfit's intuition. They do not deny that the inequality in y is a bad feature of this distribution. What they reject is that this bad feature constitutes an argument in favour of x when compared to y. This is a highly controversial distinction, though, and we may find it more appropriate to argue that the inequality in y contributes to making it worse than x, but that there are other things in y which make this alternative better all things considered. According to Temkin (1987, fn. 7, p. 142), however, such a view faces another problem, namely, that it must imply that we assign intrinsic moral value to additional lives (which is a claim rejected by both Temkin and Parfit). Otherwise, how can we say that y is not worse all things considered? If it is worse in one dimension and not better in any, it seems as if we have to accept that the mere addition of lives makes the world worse. But that is also a claim rejected by Temkin and Parfit. Hence, it is argued, we have reached an impasse, and it might seem that the only option is to accept Temkin's conclusion.

Is that really the case? I do not think so. First, many will find it obscure to deny that additional lives have no intrinsic moral value. Second, even if we should accept such a view, we could argue that y is better in another respect, to wit, that there is more total well-being. And finally, we could argue that certain features of the alternatives (that some people exist in one alternative and not in the other) make them incomparable, even though we can rank the alternatives along certain dimensions.[58] In other words, to outweigh the badness of inequality in y compared to x, we need not identify a respect in which y is better than x. It is sufficient to recognize the respects which make them incomparable. In sum, I am not convinced by Temkin's attack on transitivity on the basis of egalitarian reasoning.

Of course, this does not prove that Temkin's general claim is wrong. There might be other cases to consider, and Temkin (1996) provides a discussion of some of them. I will not elaborate on these cases, but rather turn to a brief discussion of the possible meaning of an intransitive betterness relation and the need for a defence of this property. Some people consider intransitivity in the betterness relation analytically false (Broome,

[58] This is not to say that it is never possible to provide an overall evaluation when some people do not exist in both alternatives. Broome (1996) provides an interesting discussion in this respect. My claim is simply that *if the only relevant difference* between two states is the presence of some additional lives, then it might be the case that these two alternatives are incomparable. Certainly, they are incomparable for the persons in question and, thus, it does not seem too implausible to argue that this incomparability is carried over into the betterness relation!

1991, p. 11). They argue that the transitivity of a betterness relation is a truth of logic, though they accept that there might be other (possibly intransitive) all-things-considered relations.

But then the question is whether we accept a priori to work within the framework of a betterness relation, defined by the axiom of transitivity, when we seek to establish an all-things-considered evaluation of alternative social states. In order to do so, Temkin (1996) argues, we need a substantive defence of transitivity.

> [A] conceptual defence of the axiom of transitivity is, I think, a hollow victory. Such a defence succeeds only by robbing the axiom of its force. If there is no way the axiom could fail to be true – by definition or as a matter of 'logic' – then I fear it lacks substance. A linguistic truth that is unfalsifiable is trivial, and not a useful substantive principle for guiding and assessing actions or beliefs. (p. 208)

I find myself sympathetic to this view, which also seems to be in line with Kolm (2000).

> Note that the economist's use of naming rational the existence of an ordering, of transitivity or of a maximand is very particular. This vocabulary was introduced for defending the hypothesis of maximizing behavior of individuals, because this constitutes a very handy model and these scholars did not see how to justify it . . . Remark that this sense of the term rationality is an application of its basic standard sense of 'for a reason' solely if one thinks that preferring a to b and b to c constitutes *a good reason* for preferring a to c. (p. 727, own emphasis)

However, even though I think we should acknowledge the need for a substantive defence of transitivity, it is beyond the scope of this paper to pursue this topic (but see Hurley, 1989, pp. 260–61).

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Isaiah Berlin once remarked that "[s]ome among the Great Goods cannot live together. That is a conceptual truth. We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss" (1991, p. 13). In distributive justice, this truism is easily seen, and it highlights the need for a careful examination of the various reasons that may guide us in these hard choices. Economists and philosophers often approach this task in different ways. Economists have mainly been concerned with how different reasons fit together, whereas philosophers, to a much greater extent, have explored the basis for the various reasons in question. This division of work implies that each has much to learn from the other, if we manage to find a common framework for discussion.

That is not easy, and I have to admit that I ran into many pitfalls when writing this paper. The fact that philosophers often approach the

problem at a different level of analysis makes many of the arguments hard to understand for an economist (and I assume that philosophers sometimes feel the same about the work of economists). Nevertheless, there is a lot to learn from the philosophical literature on egalitarianism and, in this paper, I have made an attempt to survey some of the main lessons and how they fit the economist's way of thinking on these issues.

Have I changed my views on any of the challenging claims about the nature of egalitarianism (mentioned in the introduction)? On some I have not. The criticism of the Pigou–Dalton principle and the intersection approach were (mainly) based on misunderstandings and, hence, do not warrant any change in view. On the rest, I believe that the philosophical literature has provided me with a more nuanced picture. Even though I have argued that the Rawlsian leximin principle certainly can be defended on the basis of egalitarian reasoning, I acknowledge that it does not necessarily have to be considered an egalitarian view. I still defend the Pareto principle and the property of transitivity, but the philosophical literature shows us the need for substantive defence of these assumptions. And finally, I no longer find non-aggregative reasoning completely implausible. On the contrary, as I have shown, it may provide us with an extremely interesting defence of the leximin principle.

What about the debate on equality versus priority? Have I become an egalitarian or a prioritarian? Both, I think. In my view, there is no reason to reject either of the two views and, hence, I believe that they should be combined in distributive reasoning. To what extent this debate will change our views on the nature of the betterness relation we eventually end up supporting is less clear to me, but, in any case, we should consider it of much value to have a better understanding of the various ways we may justify the priority we assign to the worse off.

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