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# RECENT WORK

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## EGALITARIANISM\*

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Egalitarians believe that equality is a political value of prime importance. In the period following the original publication of Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, we have learned a great deal about what exactly this might mean.<sup>1</sup> The dominant view in that period has treated egalitarianism as, primarily, a theory (or family of theories) of distributive justice. What has been called *distributive egalitarianism* is the view that justice requires that people have equal, or roughly equal, amounts of goods.<sup>2</sup> Someone who is an egalitarian in this sense may of course believe that other things, such as liberty or efficiency, also have great political importance, and even importance for justice.<sup>3</sup> So their belief in the equal distribution of goods may be tempered or qualified in various ways. But distributive egalitarians believe that there are weighty reasons in favour of an equal or roughly equal distribution of goods.

It should be obvious that this is a broad church.<sup>4</sup> There is a great deal of room for disagreement amongst distributive egalitarians over a range of issues. These include: whether, at base, the theory of justice is deontological or teleological; which other considerations, such as liberty or security or efficiency, if any, help to determine what justice requires; whether it is, precisely, equality in the distribution of goods that matters, or something resembling it, such as giving priority to the worse off; why equality (or this related thing) matters; which goods are required to be distributed (roughly) equally; among

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1. J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford University Press, revised edn. 1999).
2. See S. Scheffler, 'What is Egalitarianism?', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 31 (2003), pp. 5–39.
3. In other words, they may be *pluralist* egalitarians, holding equality to be one but not the only important political value. See D. Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?', in M. Clayton and A. Williams (eds.), *The Ideal of Equality* (Palgrave, 2000), pp. 81–125, at pp. 84–5.
4. Not all views of distributive justice conform to this model, however—Nozick's, for example, does not. See R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Basic Books, 1974). In contrast, in what is still the best introduction to contemporary political philosophy, including egalitarian views, Will Kymlicka characterises the 'egalitarian plateau' in political philosophy so broadly that Nozick is included. See W. Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2nd edn. 2002), pp. 3–4.

whom they are to be so distributed. (The latter issue itself has several parts, relating to different generations, nations, and even species.)

Rawls's book stimulated a great deal of exploration of these different possibilities, the space of which is very large indeed. In what follows I will pick out some of the main developments in this area over the last decade, starting with the very important debate about what egalitarians should seek to equalise.

### The Currency of Justice

It is a commonplace that if people are equal in one respect they will be unequal in other respects. Make people equal in wealth, and they will differ in happiness. So a fundamental aim for egalitarian political philosophy is to specify the proper object of equalisation. This has resulted in what is known as the 'equality of what?' debate, or alternatively as the debate about the *currency* of justice.<sup>5</sup>

There was intense discussion of this issue during the 1980s, which coalesced around two or three main candidates. Resourcists such as Ronald Dworkin claimed that justice requires equal or roughly equal amounts of resources.<sup>6</sup> Dworkin had made a number of powerful criticisms of what he took to be the main alternative view, which is that the currency of justice is to be understood in terms of welfare. Consider first the simplest version of this idea, which is that justice requires equal amounts of welfare itself. Dworkin made at least two criticisms of this view. First, he pressed the importance of specifying a particular conception of welfare. Dworkin distinguished between 'success theories', according to which welfare is a matter of the satisfaction of preferences or ambitions, 'conscious-state theories', according to which it is a matter of enjoyable or pleasurable conscious states, and 'objective theories', according to which it consists in certain achievements specified independently of the individual's own views. Against conscious state theories, he objects that measuring welfare in this way does not measure what people most value in their own lives. Against success and objective theories, he objects that a sensible measure of achievement of either of these kinds presupposes a prior understanding of fair shares, so that disappointment based merely on absurdly high hopes or expectations does not distort the picture. But then we

5. The seminal contributions to this debate were: A. Sen, 'Equality of What?', in S. McMurrin (ed.), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, volume 1 (University of Utah Press, 1980), pp. 353–369; R. Dworkin, 'What is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 10 (1981), pp. 185–246; R. Dworkin, 'What is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 10 (1981), pp. 283–345; R. Arneson, 'Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare', *Philosophical Studies*, 56 (1987), pp. 77–93; G.A. Cohen, 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice', *Ethics*, 99 (1989), pp. 906–944. Sen's article is reprinted in a more accessible volume: S. Darwall (ed.), *Equal Freedom. Selected Tanner Lectures on Human Value* (University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp. 307–330. (References below will be to this source.) Dworkin's contributions are now best accessed in his book *Sovereign Virtue* (Harvard University Press, 2000), which collects and extends his most important work on egalitarianism.
6. See Dworkin, 'What is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare'; *Sovereign Virtue* Chapter 1. From now on in this section I'll drop the qualification 'or roughly equal' for convenience.

need to understand what fairness requires before we understand what equalising welfare would involve, so the latter is hardly a convincing specification of the former. In sum, Dworkin claimed that any initial attraction of welfarist views depends on failing to specify a particular conception of welfare.<sup>7</sup>

Second, Dworkin pointed out that the requirement to equalise welfare implies that people with expensive tastes should receive extra resources, which seems unfair, especially (although this is not essential to Dworkin's complaint) in cases where the expensive tastes were cultivated by the individual concerned. In response to this worry, a welfarist might retreat to the idea that the appropriate *equalisandum* is opportunity for welfare, not welfare itself.<sup>8</sup> Such a view discriminates between someone who cultivates an expensive taste and someone who is merely saddled with such a taste. In being saddled, the latter person's opportunity for welfare is compromised, whereas cultivation of an expensive taste does not compromise opportunity, even though it does compromise achievement of welfare. This removes the offending implication in the case of cultivated expensive tastes, which is where the unfairness of extra resources seems most egregious. However, the resourcist can use a subtler kind of case to object to this more sophisticated form of welfarism. Consider someone who has 'cheap expensive tastes'. This person starts out with very cheap tastes. Given these cheap tastes, he requires fewer than average resources to have equal opportunity for welfare. Now suppose that he cultivates a taste that is more expensive (in the literature, the example is a desire to travel to Spain to watch bullfighting, cultivated as a result of reading Hemingway). His tastes are still, overall, cheaper than average. But equal opportunity for welfare denies him any compensation for these new, more expensive than before, but still cheaper than average, tastes, since they are the result of his choices rather than constraints on his opportunity set. To many this seems unfair, and at odds with egalitarian intuitions, since this individual ends up with fewer resources *and* less welfare than others. In this way, Dworkin can be said to have posed a dilemma for welfarists: they must choose between indulging expensive tastes and penalising inexpensive tastes.<sup>9</sup>

Amartya Sen's idea that justice requires equal *capability to function* is an alternative to both resourcism and welfarism.<sup>10</sup> Here we can treat capability as just like opportunity—it specifies potential rather than achievement. But what is a functioning? It is not the achievement of welfare, but a kind of being or doing, such as being mobile or being literate. Sen argues that an appropriate way to conceive of a person's level of advantage, for the purposes of thinking

7. See Dworkin, 'What is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare', pp. 191–228; *Sovereign Virtue*, pp. 16–48. Dworkin does not clearly define what he means by objective theories, though the characterisation I have given is, I think, implied. Dworkin's typology is similar to Parfit's: see D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (rp. with corrections, Clarendon Press, 1987), Appendix I.

8. For a well-developed version of this view, see Arneson, 'Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare'. As I note in the text below, Arneson has more recently modified his theory of justice significantly.

9. See A. Williams, 'Equality for the Ambitious', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 52 (2002), pp. 379–389.

10. See Sen, 'Equality of What?', pp. 327–330.

about justice (and economic development)<sup>11</sup>, is in terms of her capability to function in a certain set of ways.<sup>12</sup> Now having the capability to function is not the same as having welfare or opportunity for welfare, as the case of Tiny Tim shows.<sup>13</sup> Tim has average levels of welfare and opportunity for welfare, because his sunny disposition compensates his physical disabilities and poor circumstances. But his sunny disposition does not grant him average capability to function: it does not, for example, make him averagely mobile. To be capable of functioning is to be capable of certain specific things, and it seems that failure in one dimension of functioning is not fully compensated by special talent in another dimension. Likewise, to be capable of functioning seems not to be the same thing as having possession of certain resources. Sen gives the example of being properly nourished. Certainly, command of resources is relevant to this, but also relevant, of course, is individual physiology.<sup>14</sup>

In debating these and other proposals about the currency of justice, philosophers interested in egalitarianism have raised many issues relevant to ethics more broadly. For example, there has been extensive discussion of disabilities: of what they are, and in particular how they differ from expensive tastes (since like expensive tastes they decrease the rate at which resources can be converted into welfare); and what would be an appropriate response to them by social institutions.<sup>15</sup> This has developed into an interesting debate between Dworkin and Cohen, among others, about how we should conceive of the contrast between a person and her circumstances. Cohen places more emphasis on choice in drawing this distinction, so that unchosen expensive tastes are, for him, appropriately treated in a similar way to unchosen disabilities. Dworkin places more emphasis on the concept of *regret* in drawing the distinction between a person and her circumstances, so that, unless someone regrets having her expensive ‘taste’—as, for example, an addict might do—it counts

11. See for example: A. Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Clarendon Press, 1992); A. Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1999). Nussbaum follows an approach similar to Sen’s, and applies it to women’s development in particular. See M. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); and M. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford University Press, 1999).
12. Sen writes: “The relevant functionings can vary from such elementary things as being adequately nourished, being in good health, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality, etc., to more complex achievements such as being happy, having self-respect, taking part in the life of the community, and so on” (Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, p. 39).
13. See Cohen, ‘On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice’, p. 918.
14. See, for example, Sen, ‘Equality of What?’, pp. 328–329. Dworkin discusses the relationship between his and Sen’s view in *Sovereign Virtue*, pp. 299–303. The contrast between the two views is made less sharp by the fact that sophisticated forms of equality of resources, such as Dworkin’s, include personal or internal resources, such as physiological factors, within their conception of a person’s total resource bundle. Still, the doings and beings that interest Sen are specified according to an objective list, whereas what counts as a resource for Dworkin depends on the individual’s preferences. So even if we include personal or internal resources in an account of equality of resources, it seems that Sen’s view remains properly distinct.
15. See Dworkin, ‘Equality of What? Part 2: Equality of Resources’; Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, Chapter 2; Cohen, ‘On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice’; J. Wolff, ‘Fairness, Respect, and the Egalitarian Ethos’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 27 (1998), pp. 97–122.

as part of the person whether or not it was chosen.<sup>16</sup> A second sub-debate of broader interest in this area concerns different dimensions of advantage. For the purpose of a concern with justice, but also a concern with ethics more generally, should we treat Tiny Tim's sunny temperament as compensating his relative immobility? Or should we not aggregate over different dimensions of advantage in this way?<sup>17</sup>

One widely discussed feature of the debate about the currency of justice has been its use of ideas about *luck* and *responsibility*. Why should an egalitarian care about equalising opportunities for something (welfare, or functionings, say), rather than equalising achievement of the thing itself? One explanation would be: because egalitarians, like others, think it important to respect people's *freedom*, and as a result they think it important to allow differences between people's levels of achievement that result from choices made against a suitably fair background to stand. Now consider the following explanation. Roughly speaking, the level of achievement (welfare, functioning, or whatever else is providing the underlying metric) that a person reaches, given a certain opportunity set, depends on the choices she makes, and the way those choices turn out. The latter no doubt depends on luck, amongst other things, which we can call 'option luck'. But there is another kind of luck at work, too—luck in the opportunity set that a person happens to have, which we can call 'brute luck'.<sup>18</sup> After all, different people face different opportunity sets for reasons purely of date and place of birth, for example, which are surely matters of brute luck from the recipient's point of view. Insofar as they seek to equalise the opportunity sets that people face, egalitarians can be thought of as aiming to compensate for *differential brute luck*.<sup>19</sup>

These two explanations of egalitarian interest in opportunities rather than achievement might both reflect the same underlying ethic, of holding individuals responsible for their fates as a matter of justice. And the language of responsibility has been very prominent, like the language of luck, in discussions of the currency of justice. This is true not just of those who advocate overt opportunity-based views, such as equality of opportunity for welfare or equality of capability to function, but also of resourcist views such as Dworkin's. Dworkin says:

16. See Cohen, 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice', pp. 916–934; Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, pp. 285–299. For the most recent exchange, see Cohen, 'Expensive Taste Rides Again', and Dworkin, 'Replies', in J. Burley (ed.), *Dworkin and His Critics* (Blackwell, 2004).
17. The significance of different dimensions of advantage, and the expressive value of responding to different kinds of disadvantage with different kinds of compensation, are explored usefully in J. Wolff, 'The message of redistribution', *Catalyst Working Paper*, 2003.
18. The distinction between 'option luck' and 'brute luck' is drawn by Dworkin, in terms of luck that does and does not pertain to the outcome of deliberate gambles. He says, "If I buy a stock on the exchange that rises, then my option luck is good. If I am hit by a falling meteorite whose course could not have been predicted, then my bad luck is brute. . . . Obviously the difference between these two forms of luck can be represented as a matter of degree, and we may be uncertain how to describe a particular piece of luck" (Dworkin, 'What is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources', p. 293; Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, p. 73).
19. I owe this formulation to Andrew Williams.

If someone has been born blind or without talents others have, that is his bad luck, and, so far as this can be managed, a just society would compensate him for that bad luck. But if he has fewer resources than other people now because he spent more on luxuries earlier, or because he chose not to work, or to work at less remunerative jobs than others chose, then his situation is the result of choice not luck, and he is not entitled to any compensation that would make up his present shortfall.<sup>20</sup>

This emphasis on the importance of judgements about luck and responsibility for understanding justice has led some commentators to think that the whole debate about the currency of justice has really been about luck or responsibility, in a more or less subterranean fashion.<sup>21</sup> However, there are certain dangers in thinking about things this way.

The first danger stems from the ambiguity of ‘responsibility’. If we say, in the context of a discussion of justice or equality, that ‘Smith is responsible for his plight’, we might mean any of the following things:

- (1) Smith is the author of his own plight.
- (2) Justice does not require removing Smith from his plight.
- (3) (2) because (1).

The first claim attributes what Dworkin calls ‘causal responsibility’ to Smith. The second claim, on the other hand, is about what benefits or burdens it would be just for Smith to bear. This is another sense of responsibility, which Dworkin calls ‘consequential’, and which is often at issue when someone says in response to a call for help, irritably, ‘That’s *your* responsibility!’<sup>22</sup> The third claim, meanwhile, says that the requirements of justice (or consequential responsibility) are determined by facts about causal responsibility. If we say that ‘Smith is responsible’ we might mean this third thing, which really employs two different senses of responsibility at once: Smith is responsible (it is just that he bears the costs of his plight) because he is responsible (he caused his plight). Now claims of form (3) are ambitious in the sense that they express the idea, or hope, that we can explain the demands of justice by coming to understand causal responsibility.<sup>23</sup> The first danger in describing the currency

20. *Sovereign Virtue*, p. 287. Cohen said of Dworkin’s earlier essays on equality that “Dworkin has, in effect, performed for egalitarianism the considerable service of incorporating within it the most powerful idea in the arsenal of the anti-egalitarian right: the idea of choice and responsibility” (Cohen, ‘On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice’, p. 933).

21. Discussions that emphasise the concern with luck and responsibility in the currency debate include the following: Cohen, ‘On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice’; Scheffler, ‘What is Egalitarianism?’; Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, Chapter 3; J.E. Roemer, *Theories of Distributive Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1996), Chapters 7–8.

22. Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, p. 287. Dworkin’s use of the causal/consequential distinction is similar to Scanlon’s distinction between ‘substantive responsibility’ and ‘responsibility as attributability’ (T. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 248–249).

23. The most detailed and careful examination of this idea is S.L. Hurley, *Justice, Luck, and Knowledge* (Harvard University Press, 2003). Hurley presses very forceful objections to it. See also C. Woodard, ‘Egalitarianism, Responsibility and Desert’, *Imprints*, 3 (1998), pp. 25–48.

debate in terms of a concern with responsibility, then, is that relatively modest claims of forms (1) or (2) are interpreted as much more ambitious claims of form (3). Sometimes this may indeed be what is intended by participants in this debate: but it is certainly not what is always intended, and this is obscured by the tendency to think of the debate as being preoccupied with how to neutralise luck or track responsibility.<sup>24</sup>

The other main danger of this interpretation of the debate is that it risks unfairly making the debate seem trivial or perverse. Elizabeth Anderson's article 'What is the Point of Equality?' raises a number of objections to contemporary egalitarian theories.<sup>25</sup> Anderson claims that such theories have, regrettably, "come to be dominated by the view that the fundamental aim of equality is to compensate people for undeserved bad luck".<sup>26</sup> She argues that this idea is too harsh on those who *are* responsible for their burdens; that it is based on, and expresses, pity for those who are *not* responsible for their burdens, rather than respecting them as equals; and that it requires in practice a demeaning intrusion into citizens' personal lives, in order to test whether they are responsible for their fortunes or not.<sup>27</sup> Instead of characterising egalitarianism in terms of an aim to compensate for bad luck, Anderson claims, we should characterise it in terms of a desire to organise society so that its citizens stand in equal relationships to each other, by ending oppression.

Anderson makes these points forcefully, and her article has been very influential. But arguably much of the criticisms' force stems from a caricature of the work of the egalitarians she attacks, as being obsessed with luck and (causal) responsibility. One reply to the claim that contemporary egalitarian views are too harsh towards those who are responsible for their burdens, for example, is to point out that such views typically aim to elaborate reasons stemming from a concern with *equality* in particular, rather than a complete theory of justice, let alone a complete political ethic. Reasons of equality may not favour compensating such people, even if other reasons do favour compensation. Nor need concern with equality in the sense that has been elaborated in terms of luck and responsibility imply an attitude of pity for those who are not responsible for their burdens. Instead, it might express

24. 'Luck' (in the sense of brute, not option, luck) and 'responsibility' (in the causal or attributional sense not the consequential sense) tend to be used as complements in this literature, so that to say that something is a matter of luck for someone is, by definition, to say that she is not responsible for it, and vice versa. So understood, the concept of luck can of course shed no independent light on the concept of responsibility, as Hurley points out (*Justice, Luck, and Knowledge*, pp. 107–108).

25. E. Anderson, 'What is the Point of Equality?', *Ethics*, 99 (1999), pp. 287–337. Extracts of this have been reprinted in an excellent reader for theories of distributive justice, M. Clayton and A. Williams (eds.), *Social Justice* (Blackwell, 2004), and it is to this version that I shall refer. Scheffler, 'What is Egalitarianism?', pursues a similar line to that taken in Anderson's article. Meanwhile, Arneson modifies his own earlier position whilst defending the 'luck-neutralising idea' from Anderson's critique, in R.J. Arneson, 'Luck Egalitarianism and Prioritarianism', *Ethics*, 110 (2000), pp. 339–349.

26. Anderson, 'What is the Point of Equality', p. 155.

27. For a response to these objections see R.J. Arneson, 'Egalitarian Justice versus The Right to Privacy?', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 17 (2000), pp. 91–119; and Arneson, 'Luck Egalitarianism and Prioritarianism'.

only a fraternal desire to share bad brute luck as far as possible by means of compensation. Finally, egalitarians who claim that justice requires compensation for expensive tastes, for example, are not thereby committed to the idea that any state should seek to implement this in practice, to the detriment of citizens' private lives. They can allow that the intrusions into privacy that would be involved would be worse than tolerating what is (they claim) a degree of injustice.<sup>28</sup>

For the most part, the exchanges about the proper response of egalitarians to expensive tastes, handicaps, and talents that have been carried out in the language of luck and responsibility could be rephrased in other language. For example, instead of debating whether an involuntary expensive taste is its bearer's 'responsibility', or should be regarded as a matter of 'brute luck' for her, we can simply ask whether reasons of justice require her to bear its cost or not. Often those who use the language of luck and responsibility simply seek to discuss this important substantive issue (and others like it); they do not seek to gain extra leverage on the issue by appeal to the idea that causal responsibility determines consequential responsibility. To that extent, the language of luck and responsibility is dispensable. This makes clear that the issues underlying the many sophisticated contributions to this literature remain, and retain their importance, even if we come to distrust the language of luck and responsibility. They are not illusory or perverse issues for egalitarians to discuss, and they are often precisely what is at stake when we ask what is needed to end oppression so that citizens can stand in relations of equality to each other.<sup>29</sup>

### Equality or What?

So far we have been exploring the currency issue, and the role of the ideas of luck and responsibility in debates about it. Another important issue that has been prominent in recent work on egalitarianism is complementary to this, though not necessarily independent of it. Is it really *equal* amounts of advantage that people are entitled to, as a matter of justice? Or is the relevant pattern of distribution something other than strict equality—say, a *sufficiency* principle, according to which what matters is that everyone has enough?<sup>30</sup> In other words, as well as the 'equality of what?' debate, there is an 'equality or what?' debate. Now to some extent this separation of the issues is artificial. That is because a minimal specification of an egalitarian principle of justice would involve an answer to both questions, and it is the properties of that

28. Cohen makes this point as part of a defence of compensation for involuntary expensive tastes (see Cohen, 'Expensive Taste Rides Again', p. 17).

29. Cf. Dworkin's reply to Scheffler's Anderson-esque criticism, in R. Dworkin, 'Equality, Luck and Hierarchy', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 31 (2003), pp. 190–198. Scheffler replies in the same issue, in 'Equality as the Virtue of Sovereigns: A Reply to Ronald Dworkin'.

30. For defence of a sufficiency view, see H. Frankfurt, 'Equality as a Moral Ideal', *Ethics*, 98 (1987), pp. 21–43. For further discussion, see A. Rosenberg, 'Equality, Sufficiency, and Opportunity in the Just Society', *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 12 (1995), pp. 54–71.



combination that engage our intuitions about justice. To see this, note that orthodox utilitarianism can be described in at least the following two ways: maximisation as the pattern, and utility as the currency; or equalisation as the pattern, and marginal utility as the currency.<sup>31</sup> So if we abstract utterly from pattern issues when we discuss rival currencies, or vice versa, we risk going astray. Nevertheless, with this methodological qualm duly noted, it does in practice make a certain amount of sense to abstract from each issue when considering the other, and this is the way that things have tended to go.<sup>32</sup>

Suppose that you are an egalitarian, and you face a choice between two policies. One policy would give a certain benefit to one group of people, and the other would give a different benefit to a different group of people. Suppose that no member of either group has a prior entitlement to the benefit. As an egalitarian, what kinds of facts should you care about in making your choice? Here are some candidates: the size of benefit that could be given to each person; the number of potential beneficiaries in each case; the existing absolute level of advantage of each person; the existing relative level of advantage of each person.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps there are other candidates as well, but let us consider these.

Utilitarians combine the first two considerations—size of benefit to each person and number of beneficiaries—and care about the other two considerations only indirectly, insofar as they affect the total amount of benefit that can be bestowed (for example, because of diminishing marginal utility, or envy effects). In contrast, egalitarians refuse to combine the first two considerations in the utilitarian way, since they are not generally indifferent between a case in which a certain benefit goes to one person and a case in which the same amount of benefit is divided between many people. Also they are likely to care directly about at least one of the other two considerations: that is, about the levels of advantage, relative or absolute, enjoyed by the recipients.

Suppose we define egalitarianism in terms of *strict equality*. This is a natural suggestion. But notice that if we care about strict equality we care directly about only one of the four candidates mentioned above, namely relative levels of advantage, since strict equality is a purely relative matter. In itself this might seem odd: don't the other considerations, about size of benefit, number of beneficiaries, and absolute levels of advantage, at least *appear* to matter from an egalitarian point of view? Things seem worse when we consider the practical implications of aiming at strict equality in certain situations. Suppose that the only way we can achieve strict equality in a certain case is by making

31. This point is made by Sen, in 'Equality of What?', pp. 308–309. Most utilitarians, perhaps, do not aim at equalising marginal utilities under *that* description—but some do, as an interpretation of giving equal concern to all.

32. For example, Parfit sets aside the currency issue by saying: "There are many ways in which, in one of two outcomes, people can be worse off. They may be poorer, or less happy, or have fewer opportunities, or worse health, or shorter lives. Though the difference between these cases often matters, I shall be discussing some general claims, which apply to them all" (Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?', pp. 82–83).

33. Parfit brilliantly distinguishes these different possible objects of egalitarian concern, in 'Equality or Priority?' (see especially pp. 100–101).

*everyone* worse-off: bringing the currently worse-off to a lower level, and the currently better-off down to that same low level. If we favour strict equality, we seem forced to say that this change makes things in at least one way better (we might value things other than strict equality as well, which could be counter-vailing). But according to the *Levelling Down Objection*, a change that makes everyone worse off overall and none better off in any way cannot be better, even in one way; so, according to this objection, strict equality cannot be a proper aim.<sup>34</sup>

The Levelling Down Objection appears to have great force, but there are at least two interesting ways of resisting it.<sup>35</sup> One is to claim that a change that makes everyone worse off overall, and no-one better off in any way, can nevertheless be a change for the better. This is Larry Temkin's route, and it amounts to claiming that there can be impersonal goods, so that there can be changes for the better that benefit no-one.<sup>36</sup> This of course raises an interesting general issue in value theory.<sup>37</sup> Another possible reply to the Levelling Down Objection is to claim that it is *impossible* to make everyone strictly equal without thereby making at least one person better off, in at least one way, than they were before. Something like this is suggested by John Broome's claim that injustice is a personal bad: on his view, it is bad for an individual if she suffers an injustice, independently of other effects on her well-being.<sup>38</sup> If we take this line, we need not deny that a change that makes everyone worse off overall, and no-one better off in any way, cannot be a good change. We can say that the levelling down move to strict equality removed injustice, which must have been good in at least that way, even if not good overall, for the people who previously suffered that injustice. But this clearly depends on our willingness not only to analyse injustice in terms of badness, but in terms of personal badness.

Moved by the Levelling Down Objection, or for other reasons,<sup>39</sup> we might seek an alternative pattern for egalitarians to endorse. The two most prominent suggestions are *sufficiency* views and *priority* views, both of which replace strict equality's concern with relative levels of advantage with a concern for absolute levels of advantage. On the sufficiency view, we should aim to make sure that everyone reaches some threshold of advantage, at which they are sufficiently well-off.<sup>40</sup> While this may seem attractive as a practical principle,

34. On the Levelling Down Objection, see Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?', pp. 98–95, 109–115, and L. Temkin, 'Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection', in M. Clayton and A. Williams (eds.), *The Ideal of Equality*, pp. 126–161.

35. A third way is to adopt what Parfit calls Deontic Egalitarianism, according to which we should aim for equality for reasons other than making the outcome better (for example, to remove injustice). See Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?', p. 84 and *passim*.

36. See Temkin, 'Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection', pp. 139–140.

37. The issue arises in a different context in questions of intergenerational justice. See D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Part Four.

38. J. Broome, *Weighing Goods* (Blackwell, 1991), pp. 168–9. Temkin responds to Broome's view in 'Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection', pp. 146–151.

39. Joseph Raz has a different and also influential critique of strict equality. See his book *The Morality of Freedom* (Clarendon Press, 1986), Ch. 9.

40. Frankfurt writes: "With respect to the distribution of economic assets, what is important from the point of view of morality is not that everyone should have *the same* but that each should have *enough*" ('Equality as a Moral Ideal', p. 21, emphasis in original).

from a theoretical point of view it seems to many to be defective. The first, obvious, theoretical problem is to specify the threshold of sufficiency. Suppose this can be done, however. The lower it is, the more it seems implausible to claim that inequalities above that level *do not matter at all*. On the other hand, the higher it is, the more the sufficiency principle seems to give rise to perverse implications, at least if we formulate the principle such that the aim is to raise as many people as possible over the threshold. For then we may well find that the way to maximise the number of people over the threshold is to help those beneath the threshold who are closest to it, leaving those furthest away behind.<sup>41</sup>

The underlying defect of sufficiency views is that they are committed to an implausible profile of moral importance of benefits according to the absolute level of the recipient. It matters morally (or, perhaps we should say, from the point of view of justice) to benefit people who are below the threshold, but not to benefit those who are above it. Worse, if the previous point is correct, it matters more to benefit people just below the threshold than it does to benefit those way below it. At least as a specification of egalitarian impulses, this seems wildly implausible. Priority views avoid these implausible implications. They claim that the importance of a unit benefit decreases as the recipient becomes better off, so that in seeking to do what is most important, we give priority to the worse off.<sup>42</sup> As a result, those who hold a priority view value strict equality only indirectly—insofar as making people strictly equal is what giving priority to the worse off recommends. Hence (like those who hold a sufficiency view) they are not vulnerable to the Levelling Down Objection.<sup>43</sup>

Different versions of the priority view specify different relationships between moral importance and the absolute level of advantage of the recipient.<sup>44</sup> It seems likely that giving principled reasons for specifying this function one way rather another will be very difficult, if not impossible, so that a certain amount of intuitionism may be inevitable in articulating priority views fully.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, such views seem to offer an attractive way of combining concern with size of benefit, number of beneficiaries, and absolute level of advantage of beneficiaries—at the same time offering an error theory of why

41. An alternative formulation would characterise the sufficientarian aim as *minimising the aggregate shortfall from the threshold*. This would avoid the stated implication (supposing that those furthest below the threshold are the easiest to help). But why would anyone care about that peculiar and abstract aim? And minimising the aggregate shortfall might require, in some cases, leaving *everyone* below the threshold—in which case some form of prioritarianism proper, rather than the idea of sufficiency, is probably at work.

42. See Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?', p. 101.

43. Parfit emphasises that the fundamental concern is with absolute levels like this: "... on the Priority View, benefits to the worse off matter more, but that is only because these people are at a lower *absolute* level. It is irrelevant that these people are worse off *than others*. Benefits to them would matter just as much even if there *were* no others who were better off" ('Equality or Priority?', p. 104, emphasis in the original).

44. Rawls's difference principle can be thought of as a priority view, in which absolute priority is given to the worst-off group (see Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?', Appendix, pp. 116–121).

45. The best general discussion of the relative importance, for egalitarians, of the four candidate considerations that I mentioned, is Temkin's pioneering book *Inequality* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

the relative level of advantage seems to matter. Interestingly, Richard Arneson has recently shifted position from being an advocate of equal opportunity for welfare, to being an advocate of ‘responsibility-catering prioritarianism’, according to which the moral importance of a benefit to a person depends in principle on three factors: its size, the existing absolute level of advantage of the recipient, and the degree of responsibility of the recipient for that level of advantage. And he argues, in a reply to Anderson, that this particular form of ‘luck-egalitarianism’ is not vulnerable to her criticisms, in part because, as a prioritarian view, it includes no basic concern with relative levels of advantage, and so it cannot be accused—even supposing strict egalitarian views *can* be accused—of being the politics of envy or of pity.<sup>46</sup>

### Incentives and the Site of Justice

Because all versions of the priority view are ultimately concerned with individuals’ absolute levels of advantage rather than the relations between their levels of advantage, they are *inequality-permitting* views. They permit inequalities when it is impossible, for some reason, to redistribute benefits from the better-off to the worse-off (as in the cases that raise the Levelling Down Objection), or more generally when such redistribution involves waste sufficient to counteract the greater moral importance of giving a unit benefit to the worse-off. This general condition may be fulfilled when the total amount of benefits available decreases as strict equality is approached. Why would that happen? Perhaps the most plausible reason is that the total amount of benefits depends on incentive-generating inequalities: potentially productive people will produce less if they are not allowed to have a greater than average share of goods. Hence, as strict equality is approached, production, and so the total stock of goods, is reduced. It is then quite plausible to think that further approaches to strict equality will be impermissible according to a priority view.

This phenomenon is central to a very influential argument for inequality, the so-called *incentives argument for inequality*. This argument typically combines a prioritarian normative premise with an empirical premise to the effect that giving priority to the worse-off requires permitting incentive-generating inequalities.<sup>47</sup> Most discussion in this area has focused on a Rawlsian version of the incentives argument (though it should be noted that it is not an essentially Rawlsian argument), so let us also concentrate on that. Here the normative premise is Rawls’s difference principle, according to which inequalities

46. See Arneson, ‘Luck Egalitarianism and Prioritarianism’, pp. 343–344.

47. The normative premise need not be prioritarian: it might, for example, require selecting the Pareto efficient distribution that minimises the gap between the expectations of the least and most advantaged. Rawls notes this possibility in ‘A Reply to Alexander and Musgrave’, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 88 (1974), p. 648. This is reprinted in J. Rawls, *Collected Papers* edited by Samuel Freeman (Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 232–253. For further discussion see A. Williams, ‘The Revisionist Difference Principle’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 25 (1995), pp. 257–81.

are just if they are necessary to benefit the worst-off.<sup>48</sup> The empirical premise is then the claim that a certain inequality-reducing measure would harm the worst-off due to incentive effects, and the conclusion is that the inequality-reducing measure is unjust or morally prohibited. Now G.A. Cohen has made a very influential criticism of this argument.<sup>49</sup> For the sake of argument, he accepts the normative premise (in this case, the difference principle). He also accepts that the empirical premise may be true—that, in other words, if the incentives are removed, the worst-off will be harmed. But he denies that this is sufficient to show the justice of the incentives, even by the lights of the difference principle. A further condition, he insists, is that the incentive-seeking behaviour, which makes the empirical premise true, is *justified*.<sup>50</sup>

Why does Cohen add this extra condition? Well, for two reasons, one of which is specific to Rawlsian versions of the argument, and the other of which is more general. The specifically Rawlsian reason is that in a just society, Rawls claims, people accept and try to act on the principles of justice. Hence a policy whose good effects for the worst-off depends on behaviour that falls foul of this ‘full compliance’ constraint is not properly just, according to Rawls.<sup>51</sup> Cohen’s more general reason follows from his (Cohen’s) substantive claim that, in an ideally just society, people would be able to justify their behaviour to each other. But, supposing the difference principle correctly specifies a necessary condition for the justice of inequalities as being that such inequalities are necessary to benefit the worst-off, the potentially productive could not justify holding out for incentives. For these incentives are *not* strictly necessary to benefit the worst-off; they are necessary only given the attitudes of the potentially productive. After all, they could work just as hard in an equal society as they choose to work in an inequality-permitting society.<sup>52</sup> Since the incentives-seeking behaviour cannot be justified, the incentives-providing policies are not fully just, even if they are the most prudent response to that behaviour.

48. For Rawls, benefiting the worst-off is really a necessary but insufficient condition for the justice of an inequality: his other requirements of justice, which have lexical priority over the difference principle, must also be met (see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 266–267). For the purposes of exposition of the incentives argument, however, we treat these other conditions as met, against which background the difference principle specifies a sufficient condition, in effect.

49. See G.A. Cohen, ‘Incentives, Inequality, and Community’, in G.B. Petersen (ed.), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, volume 13 (University of Utah Press, 1992). This is reprinted in Darwall (ed.), *Equal Freedom*, pp. 331–397, and it is to the latter source that I shall refer. Note that the incentives argument, whether Rawlsian or not, does not depend on any claims about the rich deserving or being entitled to the fruits of their labours; rather, it claims that they should get these benefits because otherwise they will behave in ways (being less productive) that will harm the worst-off.

50. See Cohen, ‘Incentives, Inequality, and Community’, pp. 348–353.

51. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 221–227; Cohen, ‘Incentives, Inequality, and Community’, pp. 385–386.

52. My account simplifies Cohen’s: he is careful to discuss cases in which this claim about what the productive could do might not be true. See Cohen, ‘Incentives, Inequality, and Community’, pp. 355–362.

Most attention has been focused on the particular version of Cohen's critique that is aimed at Rawlsians. Here the central issue, given that it is clear that the compliance constraint does apply, is whether incentive-seeking is permitted by the principles of justice. This has given rise to a very interesting and important debate about the scope of such principles—both as a matter of exegesis of Rawls, and more generally. One view, which Cohen describes as 'liberal-egalitarian', is that such principles govern the establishment and maintenance of the basic social institutions only, leaving everyday individual behaviour, including choices about where and how hard to work, to be governed by other moral principles. The other view, which Cohen associates with 'socialist egalitarians', claims that the principles of justice have broader scope, and in fact constrain personal behaviour in a way that goes beyond the establishment and maintenance of just institutions. Cohen takes the latter line, arguing that egalitarianism requires a certain kind of *ethos*, which may be fairly demanding of individuals. Moreover, he claims that Rawlsians have no good grounds on which to draw a sharp contrast between the establishment and maintenance of just institutions, on one hand, and everyday personal behaviour, on the other. As he points out, this raises worries about the contrast that liberal egalitarians typically draw between personal and political issues that resonate with familiar feminist themes.<sup>53</sup>

Cohen's critics have highlighted several points at which Rawls can be defended.<sup>54</sup> But as I have mentioned, Cohen's critique raises more general issues. Some critics have focused more explicitly on the wider issue about the proper scope of principles of justice,<sup>55</sup> or the issue of whether the egalitarian ethos that Cohen proposes is compatible with freedom of occupational choice.<sup>56</sup> But perhaps the widest issue concerns the role that assumptions about behaviour—or, indeed, other kinds of factual assumption—should play in theorising

53. See G.A. Cohen, 'Where the Action Is: On the Site of Distributive Justice', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 26 (1997), pp. 3–30; see also Cohen's marvellously titled book, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (Harvard University Press, 2000), Chs. 8 and 9. The classic source for feminist criticism of the personal/political distinction in political philosophy is S.M. Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (Basic Books, 1989). A more recent work is M. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford University Press, 1999). There is also an obvious connection between the idea of an ethos of justice and broader debates about demandingness in ethics. On the latter, see for example S. Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Clarendon Press, 1982), and S. Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Clarendon Press, 1989).

54. Among the most important responses to Cohen are D. Estlund, 'Liberalism, Equality and Fraternity in Cohen's Critique of Rawls', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 6 (1998), pp. 99–112; A. Williams, 'Incentives, Inequality, and Publicity', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 27 (1998), pp. 226–248; L.B. Murphy, 'Institutions and the Demands of Justice', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 27 (1999), pp. 251–291; T. Pogge, 'On the Site of Distributive Justice: Reflections on Cohen and Murphy', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 29 (2000), pp. 138–169; J. Cohen, 'Taking People As They Are?', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 30 (2001), pp. 363–386.

55. This is true, for example of Murphy, 'Institutions and the Demands of Justice', and Pogge, 'On the Site of Distributive Justice: Reflections on Cohen and Murphy'.

56. T.M. Wilkinson, *Freedom, Efficiency, and Equality* (Macmillan, 2000). A further issue is whether Cohen's own version of egalitarianism, with its emphasis on leaving the benefits and burdens which result from choice in place, is compatible with his suggestion that the potentially productive should choose to work hard so that their extra product can be used to benefit others, i.e. the worst-off (see Hurley, *Justice, Luck, and Knowledge*, Ch. 8).

about justice, or in ethics more generally. Some factual assumptions are true because people behave wrongly. Does the truth of such assumptions suffice to warrant their use in arguments about what justice (or some other value or principle) requires? If so, we seem to be in the business of trimming our conception of justice too readily in light of human frailty. If not, we can ask what *does* suffice to warrant the use of behavioural, or other factual, assumptions. Interestingly, Cohen has recently argued that, at the deepest level, normative principles are *wholly insensitive* to facts.<sup>57</sup> The generality of this claim, whether true or not, reflects the generality of the issues his critique of the incentives argument ultimately raises.

### Concluding Remarks

The theory of distributive justice continues to dominate discussion in analytical political philosophy, and variants of egalitarianism continue to dominate discussion of the theory of distributive justice. The quantity and quality of recent discussion of egalitarianism has made it impossible to comment on all of the important developments here. So I will finish by briefly mentioning two other important ways in which the discussion of egalitarianism has gone.<sup>58</sup>

First, a very significant strand of discussion within egalitarianism that does not quite fit the distributive egalitarian model concerns so-called left-wing libertarianism. Like ordinary right-wing libertarians such as Nozick, left-wing libertarians make respect for liberty central to their views, usually in the form of a right of self-ownership.<sup>59</sup> But they develop this idea in a recognisably egalitarian fashion—advocating, in one case, an unconditional basic income,<sup>60</sup> or in another case, a right to appropriate unowned resources that is constrained by equality of opportunity for welfare.<sup>61</sup> The central issue here, and the subject of continuing debate, is the compatibility of self-ownership with

57. See G.A. Cohen, 'Facts and Principles', in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 31 (2003), pp. 211–245. Cohen's thesis (p. 243) is that "principles which reflect facts reflect principles that don't reflect facts", where 'reflect' means (p. 213) "include . . . among the grounds for affirming them". Thus Cohen argues that the deepest grounds for affirming principles are fact-insensitive. He uses this claim to launch a fundamental critique of Rawlsian (and other forms of) constructivism.

58. I could also have mentioned at least two other important strands of discussion. One is a recent revival of interest in desert-based theories of justice. See, for example, D. Miller, *Market, State and Community. Theoretical Foundations of Market Socialism* (Clarendon Press, 1989); G. Cupit, *Justice as Fittingness* (Clarendon Press, 1996); S. Olsaretti (ed.), *Desert and Justice* (Clarendon Press, 2003). A second is the great interest that has been shown in the relationship between egalitarianism and multiculturalism—on which, see, for example, W. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Clarendon Press, 1995), and B. Barry, *Culture and Equality* (Polity Press, 2001).

59. A right of self-ownership is, roughly, a Lockean right against coercion in the disposition of one's body, including one's labour.

60. See P. Van Parijs, *Real Freedom for All* (Clarendon Press, 1995). For a critique of Van Parijs's view, see S. White, 'Liberal Equality, Exploitation, and the Case for an Unconditional Basic Income', *Political Studies*, 45 (1997), pp. 312–26. Van Parijs replies in the same issue.

61. M. Otsuka, *Libertarianism without Inequality* (Clarendon Press, 2003).

different principles of world-ownership: can the stringent respect for individual liberty enshrined by the right of self-ownership be combined with egalitarian theses about the ownership and distribution of external resources?<sup>62</sup>

Finally, it is impossible to give a sensible account of recent developments in egalitarianism without mentioning the explosion of discussion of *international* justice over the last decade or so. Life is much easier for the theorist of justice if she begins with an unrealistically simple case, in which the problem is to define principles of justice for a society that is politically and generationally closed. That is hard enough. But of course neither of these restrictions is satisfactory for anyone with an aspiration to derive the practical implications of her theory of justice, and so there is a natural pressure to relax these simplifying restrictions. Rawls devoted some discussion to each of these tasks in his *A Theory of Justice*. In the years since, discussion of intergenerational justice and international justice has been intense. The latter in particular has become a sub-discipline in its own right.<sup>63</sup>

62. Otsuka claims that self-ownership is compatible with equality in *Libertarianism without Inequality*; for the opposite view, see G.A. Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

63. On international justice see, for example, J. Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Harvard University Press, 1999); D. Miller, *On Nationality* (Clarendon Press, 1995); I. Shapiro and L. Brilmayer (eds.), *Global Justice* (New York University Press, 1999); T. Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Polity Press, 2002); S. Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders* (Oxford University Press, 2004).