# EGALITARIANISM AND REPUGNANT CONCLUSIONS

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**ABSTRACT**

Most philosophers discuss the Repugnant Conclusion as an objection to total utilitarianism. But this focus on total utilitarianism seems to be one-sided. It conceals the important fact that other competing moral theories are also subject to the Repugnant Conclusion. The primary aim of this paper is to demonstrate that versions of egalitarianism are subject to the Repugnant Conclusion and other repugnant conclusions.

# EGALITARIANISM AND REPUGNANT CONCLUSIONS[*]

> **They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General. (Kurt Vonnegut).**

## (i)      INTRODUCTION

A principle that has attached much attention within modern normative moral philosophy is:

*The Total Welfare Principle*:
The best outcome is the one with the greatest total sum of welfare value

A well-known objection to this principle is the Repugnant Conclusion.

> *The Repugnant Conclusion*
> For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with very high quality of life [population A], there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living [population B].[1]

Derek Parfit believes that the Repugnant Conclusion (RC) provides firm ground on which to resist the total welfare principle of what is often called *total utilitarianism.*[2] Total utilitarianism is the normative moral theory that, besides the total welfare principle, entails the *consequentialist* component, which states that 'the right act is the act, which promotes the best outcome'.[3]

In the literature on this subject that has emerged since Parfit's objection, most philosophers discuss the RC as an objection to total utilitarianism.[4] But this focus on total utilitarianism is one-sided. It conceals the important fact that other competing moral theories are also subject to the RC.[5]

The aim of this paper is threefold. Firstly and primarily, I will demonstrate that versions of egalitarianism imply the RC and other repugnant conclusions. The repugnance of these other conclusions can be stated in terms of what in the literature is called 'The Levelling Down Objection'. Second, I want to show that egalitarianism in certain cases where the existence of individuals is contingent upon our choices cannot be subject to the Levelling Down Objection often

posed against egalitarianism.[6] Finally, I want, nevertheless, to mention that egalitarianism in the above-mentioned cases is subject to an Impersonal Levelling Down Objection. A kind of Levelling Down Objection that, quite contrary to the traditional Levelling Down Objection, does not rely on the contention that some are made worse off (and no one better off) by a levelling down.

## (ii)    EGALITARIANISM  AND  REPUGNANT  CONCLUSIONS

To begin with, I will briefly specify which versions of egalitarianism are the focal points of the present examination.

Equality is an important value in moral philosophy and political reasoning. But views about equality can vary according to at least two factors. There are different versions of egalitarianism depending on the *kind of equality* in question (equality before the Law, equality concerning distribution of goods or the equal importance of everyone). Most egalitarians, and indeed most normative moral philosophers are concerned with the *equal importance* of welfare. For instance, in the way that "[…] an increase in the well-being of a woman counts as much as a comparable increase in the well-being of a man, my welfare counts as neither more nor less that yours, and so on".[7] Egalitarians vary also according to the *'currency' of equality* (welfare, rights, resources etc.). In this paper, however, I want to focus on *distributive egalitarianism,* which holds that, in determining the goodness of outcomes, equality in the distribution of the good (e.g. welfare or resources) is morally relevant. Roughly speaking, the core of distributive egalitarianism (henceforth egalitarianism) is the notion that the more equality there is in the distribution of the good, the better.[8]

In order to answer the question whether egalitarianism implies the RC, I will distinguish between monistic egalitarianism and pluralistic egalitarianism and between different ways of measuring equality (or inequality).

### a) Monistic egalitarianism

According to monistic egalitarianism equality is treated as the *only* morally relevant factor. Nothing else matters in the evaluation of outcomes. However, to decide whether monistic egalitarianism entails the RC depends on how to measure equality (or inequality).[9]

For most philosophers and economists the central idea is that the degree of equality in a population (or between populations) depends on how the worse off fare relative to the better off. Let's call this vaguely stated view on the measurement of equality for the Standard View (SV).[10]

Monistic egalitarianism where equality is measured by the SV implies that population A and B are *equally good*, since there is perfect equality in both populations. Although this might strike many as repugnant, it cannot be as repugnant as the implication of total utilitarianism, which implies that population B is *better* than population A. So on *this* comparison between outcomes, monistic egalitarianism (combined with the SV) is not as vulnerable to the RC as total utilitarianism.

Equality can nevertheless be measured differently and thus, as we shall see, provide different answers to whether monistic egalitarianism entails the RC. Instead of measuring equality as a relation between the better and the worse off in, for instance, a population, one can measure equality according to how many relations of equality there exist in the given population. Let's call this view the Non-Standard View (NSV). The NSV is in accordance with the general idea that equality is a relationship between different people. It should now be obvious that if monistic egalitarianism is measured with the NSV, it follows that population B is preferable over population A, since there are more relations of equality in B than in A.

In sum, if monistic egalitarianism is evaluated in combination with the NSV, it will entail the RC. So on *this* comparison between outcomes, monistic egalitarianism (combined with the NSV) is as vulnerable to the RC as total utilitarianism.

However, in connection with a comparative evaluation of other outcomes than A and B, monistic egalitarianism can entail conclusions that are also repugnant. First, monistic egalitarianism would, unlike total utilitarianism, imply that two populations A and B* are *equally good,* even if the *number of people* in A and B* are the *same* - and the people in A have much more total welfare than the people in B*. Assume furthermore that the welfare is distributed equally within each outcome and that all the people in B* have lives that are worth living.[11] This is problematic. It does not seem right to claim that B* is as good as A, if every individual in A has much more welfare than every individual in B*.

Secondly, monistic egalitarians will be forced to accept, again unlike total utilitarianism, that if a population A* contains one person with a life barely above the level of all the other very well off people in A*, population B* is better than A* - assuming that the number of people in A* and B* are the same[12]

If you believe that the RC is indeed repugnant, these implications of monistic egalitarianism might also strike you as repugnant. In other words, monistic egalitarianism entails the following repugnant conclusions:

*Repugnant Conclusion\* (RC\*)*
For any possible population (A) of at least ten billion people, all of whom have a very high quality of life, there must be some population (B\*) of the same size, whose existence, if other things were equal, would be *equally good*, even though all its members have lives that are barely worth living.

*Repugnant Conclusion\*\* (RC\*\*)*
For any possible population (A\*) of at least ten billion people, all of whom have a very high quality of life except one person who has an extra high quality of life, there must be some population (B\*) of the same size whose existence, if other things were equal, would be *better*, even though all its members have lives that are barely worth living.

These conclusions can be claimed to be repugnant because they violate the following plausible principle:

*Principle 1*
Everything else being equal, if two populations A and B are of the same size, and every person in A is better off than every person in B, then A is better than B.[13]

Assume, for the discussion in this section, that the people in the populations mentioned are necessary people. Necessary people are people that have existed, exist, or will exist independently of our choices. A and B\* could, for instance, be the populations of two distinct tribes in South America or different national groups in Scandinavia on the 5th of January 2004.[14]

## b) Pluralistic egalitarianism

Egalitarians can, of course, be pluralists. They can claim, for instance, that population B in Parfit's objection is better than A, because B contains a larger total sum of welfare and because this additional moral factor outweighs the moral factor of equality. Hence, at least some versions of pluralistic egalitarianism imply the RC. Depending, of course, on the weight one attributes to the different values of e.g. total welfare and equality. Nevertheless, worse is to come.

Pluralistic egalitarians have to admit (i) that population A and B\* are *in one relevant sense* equally good - namely, concerning equality, and (ii) that B\* is *in one relevant sense* better than A\* - namely, concerning equality. Again, however, these implications seem repugnant. But this is not because they imply the RC\* or the RC\*\*. The pluralist who favours total welfare as a morally relevant factor does, for one thing, not have to concede that B\* and A are equally good, all things

considered (or that B* is better that A*, again all things considered). However, by implying (i) and (ii) pluralistic egalitarianism violates the following further principle, which can be derived from total utilitarianism.[15]

> *Principle 2*
> Everything else being equal, if two populations A and B are of the same size, and every person in A is better off than every person in B, then A is, in any relevant sense, better than B.[16]

Assume, once again, that the people in the populations mentioned in this section are necessary people.

To further illustrate the problem of violating this principle, ask how, in any relevant respect, B* (for example) can be as good as A, if everyone in population A are better off than everyone in population B*. How can *equality* in any relevant respect make population A and B* equally good, when equality in itself does not affect the welfare of the members in these populations? By analogy, imagine two people Peter and Paul:

*Peter and Paul*
Peter and Paul have a very high quality of life during the first six months of 2003 (on a welfare scale from 1-10, let's say that their life in that period is on the level of 9). In the last six months of 2003 they both have a sudden and drastic decrease in their welfare because of a car accident on the 1st of July. The result of the accident is that they both in the last six months of 2003 experience a life on the level of 3 on the welfare scale.

But how could this decrease in welfare for Peter and Paul make the latter period of 2003 equally good to the former period in any relevant sense – when they are both worse off? This should go for all such equalities between people – and so for the one between A and B*.[17]

One way for egalitarians to resist this unattractive implication is to accept that equality at higher levels matters more, morally, than equality at lower levels.[18] I will not, however, pursue this strategy here.[19]

### (iii)    EGALITARIANISM AND THE LEVELLING DOWN OBJECTION

The objection that both monistic and pluralistic forms of egalitarianism in certain comparisons violate principle 1 and 2 can be stated in terms of the frequently proposed 'levelling down objection' (LDO) to egalitarianism.[20] For instance, egalitarianism must accept that the levelling

down from A* to B*, at least in one sense is a move for the better, since this transition establishes equality between the two populations. However, before pursuing this thought, let us just go over the LDO.

Imagine two populations, A and B, of the same size. In A, the best off are at 100 and the worst off are at 50, and in B all are equally well off, though they are less well off than the members of A, say they are all at 40. According to the LDO, egalitarianism implies that the levelling down of the people in A to the level of the people in B is an improvement — at least, in one sense. But, argue adherents of the LDO, one distribution cannot be better than another distribution, if some are worse off (the A-people) and no one better off.[21] The force of the LDO derives from a principle in the vein of the following:

> *The Person-affecting Principle*
> One outcome A cannot be better or worse than another outcome B, in any relevant sense, if it is not better or worse for someone.[22]

The person-affecting principle (PAP) gives a justification of why it is problematic to violate principle 1 and 2. One could now claim that the levelling down, from A* to B*, is in no sense an improvement. It is not an improvement, since it is not better for the people in B*, given that they have the same amount of welfare as before, nor is it better for the people in A*, as they are made worse off by the levelling down. Furthermore how can B* in any relevant sense be equally as good as A, if everyone in A is better off than everyone in B*? This is the traditional LDO applied to our two cases of comparison (the one between A and B* and the one between A* and B*).

However, this way of reasoning only works if the populations A (or A*) and B* involve *necessary people*. Necessary people are people that have existed, exist or will exist independently of our choices. When we make comparative evaluations of outcomes like A (or A*) and B* it could nevertheless be the case that these outcomes did not involve necessary people, but rather *contingent people*. Contingent people are people whose existence is dependent on our choices and therefore only exist in some but not all of the possible outcomes available to us. In order to make clear the latter possibility imagine that the comparative evaluation of, say, A and B* could (borrowing from an example by Parfit) be described as follows:[23]

*Two Different Policies*

Let us accept that we can adopt one and only one of two policies concerning our use of resources: policy I (call it the conservation policy) or policy II (call it the depletion policy). If we adopt conservation, it will follow that in 300 years from now population A* will emerge. If, on the other hand, we adopt depletion it follows that population B* will emerge instead. Assume furthermore that the people in population A* and B* would be different people, thus having different identities.

In this scenario, as we shall see, it will follow from egalitarianism (whether monistic or pluralistic, or whether measured by the SV or the NSV) that B*, in at least one relevant sense, is better than A*. My objection to egalitarianism in cases involving different contingent people cannot, as we shall see shortly, be stated in terms of the traditional levelling down objection. However, I will argue that egalitarianism violates principle 1.

In cases involving contingent people, adherents of the traditional levelling down objection *cannot* argue against egalitarianism as they used to do.

Firstly, *no one* is worse off if population B* is brought into existence because of the depletion policy. If B* is brought into existence, population A* will not exist and therefore cannot be worse off in any relevant sense. And the people in B* are not worse off (compared to non-existence) since they have lives worth living. Secondly, some are better off if population B* is brought into existence; the people in B* are better off by being brought into existence compared to non-existence! At least, this is a plausible kind of reasoning if we believe that existence can, instrumentally, benefit a person. And why should we not do so, given that most of us believe that bringing a person into existence, who will, for instance, always suffer from extreme pain, can harm such a person? So, if being brought into existence can harm a person, then being brought into existence can also benefit her - if she experiences a good life – thus making her better off than no life at all. It will thus be better for the people in B* to exist than not to exist.[24] So in one relevant sense B* is better than A*, namely for the B*-people. In what follows A* and B* will represent different contingent people.

However, it seems correct to say the following: If you are a monistic egalitarian, B* is better than A* - but then, as we have already seen, principle 1 is violated - and that is not acceptable. On the other hand, if you are a pluralistic egalitarian, you are not committed to violate principle 1, as the larger total sum of welfare in A* could be the additional moral factor that outweighs the surplus (of the moral factor) of equality in B*. However, in cases involving different contingent people both monistic- and pluralistic egalitarianism, as we have seen in the case with necessary people, also

violate principle 2. But, as we have just see, this violation is unproblematic, since B* is better than A* in one relevant sense.

A final comment, just mentioned as an idea for those egalitarians who are reluctant to embrace the person-affecting principle.[25] One could argue that egalitarianism, in the evaluation of outcomes that represents different contingent people, is still the proper target of a kind of levelling down. However, it is a levelling down that is different from the traditional levelling down. The kind of levelling down that I have in mind is a kind of levelling down which does not imply that someone is *the subject* of levelling down and therefore is made worse off than before. On the contrary, as we have just seen, if population B* is brought into existence (as a matter of our choice) some (the B*-people) are better off. But it is a kind of levelling down (let us call it the Impersonal Levelling Down Objection) that allows egalitarians to accept that it, at least in one sense, is better to actualise population B* instead of population A*. It is a levelling down because egalitarians accepts that a future world where all people are at a lower welfare level is better, at least concerning equality, than a future world where everybody has much better lives, though that future world will not be perfectly equal.

In sum, my objection is that egalitarianism is not always subject to the traditional levelling down objection, but rather, when it comes to choices that involve different contingent people, to an Impersonal Levelling Down Objection.

## (iv)     CONCLUSION

I hope to have shown that some versions of egalitarianism entail the RC or conclusions that are like the RC. Thus, it is not just total utilitarianism that needs to answer the objection raised by the RC. The scope of the objection should also cover the discussed versions of egalitarianism. Furthermore, I have argued that these versions of egalitarianism imply conclusions that are otherwise repugnant. These latter repugnant conclusions draw on the plausibility of principle 1 and 2, but could also be supported by the levelling down objection.

But, as I have also tried to argue, the levelling down objection, in its traditional form, has no force in cases involving the evaluation of outcomes containing contingent people. Instead, egalitarianism is in these cases subject to an impersonal levelling down objection.

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## NOTES

[1] Parfit 1984, p. 388. I have added the parentheses.

[2] For philosophers who use the term 'total utilitarianism' see e.g. Temkin 1993, and Holtug 1999.

[3] Total utilitarianism is usually opposed to *average utilitarianism* which, besides the consequentialist component, accepts that 'the best outcome is the one with the greatest average sum of welfare value', see e.g. Smart & Williams 1973 pp. 27-28. For a critique of average utilitarianism see e.g. Kagan 1998 pp. 46-47.

[4] Cf. Glover 1977, p. 69-71, Munthe 1996 p. 29, Tännsjö 1992 og 2002, Ryberg 1996, p. 134-165, Kymlicka 2002, p. 33-37.

[5] Some have discussed the RC as an objection to The Priority View. See e.g. Holtug 1999 and Petersen 2002.

[6] Many people have posed the LDO against egalitarianism. See e.g. Raz 1986, p. 240, Parfit 1998, p. 9-10, Holtug 1998.

[7] Kagan 1998, p. 49.

[8] Within distributive egalitarianism there exists a vast amount of more specific theories that turn on answers to the question of what kinds of inequalities that are morally unjust. Are, for instance, inequalities that are the result of peoples' own choices morally unjust and should they thus be subsidised? See e.g. Scheffler 2003, Vallentyne 2002, or Lippert-Rasmussen 2001 for discussions of such questions.

[9] In what follows I will write 'equality' instead of the longer 'equality (or inequality)'.

[10] For an example of how differently one can measure equality/inequality within the SV, see Temkin 1993, chapter 5.

[11] In this comparison of outcomes we need not differentiate between whether equality is measured by the SV or the NSV, as monistic egalitarianism will deliver the same answer no matter which of the two measurements of equality/inequality is brought into play. By the way, the last sentence has been added for stylistic reasons in order to formulate some repugnant conclusions on the next page – that in form resembles the original RC.

[12] This will be true no matter what kind of standard of measurement (whether the SV or the NSV) is employed.

[13] This principle is modelled on a Pareto principle which says: 'A distribution is optimal if and only if there is no feasible alternative distribution in which at least one person is better off and no one is worse off'. For adherents of this principle see e.g. Ng 1980, p. 31 and Griffin 1986, p. 147. For critics see e.g. Cohen 1995 and Shaw 1999.

[14] For an excellent description of the difference between necessary and contingent people see Bykvist 1998. chapter 5.

[15] Repugnant conclusions that would violate the following principles could easily be constructed, as in the discussion of monistic egalitarianism in section (ii) a. However, for brevity I have omitted an explicit description of them in the text.

[16] This principle cannot be derived from the Pareto Principle, as it does not entail the clause 'in any relevant sense'.

[17] For adherents of the view that equality has positive value in itself, see e.g. Temkin 1993. See Persson 2001 for the view that unjust inequality is intrinsically bad, whereas equality has neutral value.

[18] While this strategy clearly works in the comparative evaluation between A and B*, it does not necessarily works in the comparison between A* and B*. However, it could work in the latter comparison, if the equality relations that exist in A* (apart from the one person) at a higher level weigh more heavily than the larger amount of equality relations at the lower level of B*.

[19] I do not know of any who has developed this strategy in detail, but Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen made me aware of the possibility.

[20] Many people have posed the LDO against egalitarianism. See note 6 in this paper.

[21] See Temkin 1993 and Persson 2001 for a critique of the LDO.

[22] For a wording of the person-affecting principle very much like this see Temkin 1993, pp. 249-55, Heyd 1992, pp. xi-xii and Roberts 1998, p. 1. See Holtug (forthcoming) for a detailed critical discussion of a range of person-affecting principles.

[23] I here follow Parfit's example in Parfit 1984, pp. 361-64.

[24] See e.g. Holtug 2001 for a convincing argument that it is valuable for individual P to come into existence, if P has a life worth living. See also Petersen 2001 for a critique of the view that individuals cannot benefit from coming into existence.

[25] See, for instance, Temkin 1993.