

'If you care about people, you cannot care about equality, since an equal distribution of well-being is not necessarily good for anyone.' Discuss.

Although consequentialist person-affecting views are incompatible with equality being intrinsically valuable, there are other moral positions available which value individuals but still leave space to care about equality. Ideal utilitarianism and deontic egalitarianism are two such positions. Both value individuals (or more specifically in the case of deontic egalitarianism, the relations between them), but the fact that an equal distribution of wellbeing is not necessarily good for anyone does not remove the possibility of equality being an intrinsic good under these theories, since they do not adopt a person-affecting view. In this essay, I first briefly clarify the meaning of "care about" in a moral context, before demonstrating that an equal distribution of wellbeing is indeed not necessarily good for anyone. Then, I argue that while this prevents a person-affecting consequentialist from caring intrinsically about equality, prioritarians may still place some instrumental value on equality in wellbeing. Finally, I show how other moral theories are compatible with valuing equality intrinsically, though I make no claims regarding what this says about their respective plausibility.

I take someone to "care about people" if they are an adherent of a moral theory which ascribes intrinsic value to the welfare or rights of individuals. Since one can care about several things simultaneously, this need not be the *only* good they claim is morally significant, but a distinction must be made with cases where one "cares about" a good only insofar as it is instrumentally useful for procuring other things. Using this looser sense of the phrase, there would be no conflict at all between caring about people and caring about equality, because the pursuit of equality would merely be in service of furthering the moral interests of individuals. Importantly, restricting our focus to cases where equality is valued as a *terminal good* means that empirical arguments along the lines of "I care about equality because diminishing returns from money means that a more equal distribution of resources leads to greater aggregate welfare" do not trivially render false our interpretation of the titular claim. So, someone "care[s] about equality" only if their chosen moral theory asserts that equality is intrinsically valuable.*

Examining the Levelling Down Objection gives us a clear demonstration that moving to increase equality in the distribution of wellbeing does not necessarily benefit anyone. Drawing on Parfit (1997), consider the following two worlds:

| | Person A | Person B | |
|---------|----------|----------|---|
| World 1 | 200 | 100 | <i>The numbers in the cells represent each individual's level of wellbeing in that world.</i> |
| World 2 | 100 | 100 | |

Although World 2 has a more equal distribution of wellbeing, no individual is made better off by moving from World 1 to World 2: all that happens is that Person A becomes worse off. One cannot claim that, despite appearances, Person B actually is better off as they no longer have to deal with the indignity of having less than Person A, because this is already accounted for in the figures – we are dealing with wellbeing here, not merely units of *some* resource. For a consequentialist who believes that *p* is good only if it is good for some people, it is therefore impossible to care intrinsically about equality. If something is an intrinsic good, then more of it must be valuable, but as the Levelling Down Objection shows, increasing equality is not necessarily good for anyone. There are certain circumstances in which a holder of person-affecting views might incidentally aim for equality of wellbeing: prioritarians, who hold that welfare has diminishing marginal moral value, will always choose an equal world over an unequal one if the sum of welfare must remain fixed (Brown 2003). But

* I am careful here not to require that the theory views equality of wellbeing as intrinsically valuable, because, as I come-go on to discuss, there exist many moral theories which prize equality but are not solely interested in wellbeing (for instance, they might claim that inequalities in resource allocation are unfair and thus wrong).

Commented [HW1]: I think person-affecting views are a red herring with this question. It's not obvious that caring about people requires a person-affecting account of the good (an a monistic one at that, rather than a pluralistic one).

Commented [HW2]: I'm not sure you end up justifying this first claim

Commented [HW3]: My impression is that, for the exams, it's good practice to make the very first sentence an extremely clear and direct response to the question. This first sentence probably isn't quite direct enough.

Commented [HW4]: Probably better to use 'intrinsic' here and avoid introducing a new technical term without a definition

Commented [RS5]: p127 of the Campbell has an interesting point about prioritarians and the moral psychology of caring; no space to discuss but different definitions are available.

Commented [HW6]: I think the phrasing in this paragraph and the next doesn't make it 100% clear that you're stating the Levelling Down Objection, as against just referring to it abstractly

Commented [RS7]: Question: is this identical to the claim that "an equal distribution of well-being is not necessarily good for anyone"? At face value yes, but I'm unsure. In particular, maybe there's something weird going on when we switch from discussing goodness to betterness.

Commented [HW8R7]: Yes. I think the question's a bit poorly worded—should be "better for anyone" rather than "good for anyone".

Commented [RS9]: A more promising rebuttal might be to argue that levels of wellbeing are morally meaningless, that what matters for a person prudentially is their relations with other people, and that these relations are better in World 2 than World 1. I can't work out a way to reply to this, but also I am having trouble thinking about what it means for relations to be better *separately* from wellbeing in a way that isn't merely semantic. (i.e., why can't we just call the realised value of the relations what we had been calling wellbeing before?)

Commented [HW10R9]: In one sense, precise levels of wellbeing might be meaningless because a person's wellbeing just can't be measured on such a detailed scale. (I remember Parfit saying something about this briefly in his paper.) But it seems hard to deny that they're at least *somewhat* meaningful—they might carry the right ranking of best to worst, at least. (This would make the numbers at least an *ordinal* ranking.)

Alternatively, they could be meaningless because wellbeing just isn't something that's comparable across people—that how good something is for you and how good it is for me ...

Commented [HW11]: Not clear whether this is supposed to be an act o a world or something else

Commented [RS12]: Is this right? Brief scan of SEP on intrinsic vs extrinsic goods didn't cast much light on it.

Commented [HW13R12]: I don't think this plausibly follows just from it being an intrinsic good. But that's okay for your purposes—it seems overwhelmingly plausible that more wellbeing is better.

this is not what we meant by caring about equality – it is not something the prioritarian does (or can) intrinsically value.

Other moral theories, including some consequentialist ones, do enable their adherents to place intrinsic value on equality. Ideal utilitarians like G.E. Moore, who deny that hedonic wellbeing is all that matters morally, are perfectly able to include equality as one of the intrinsic goods to be maximised within their pluralist worldview. This creates difficulties elsewhere, notably in how to reconcile conflicts between sources of ultimate value in a principled way, but it nevertheless is a theory whose proponents can care about individuals as well as equality independently of whether it benefits any person (Parfit 1997). Alternatively, and as Parfit notes, one could argue from a non-consequentialist position that we should care about equality not because it is a good outcome, but rather because it is the natural result of just and right actions being taken. If what matters morally is fairness in how individuals are treated, then we care about how comparatively well-off people are (i.e., equality) because moral agents have a duty to act fairly and respect others' claims to resources (Otsuka and Voorhoeve 2009). This deontic view concerns itself with a narrower set of distributional concerns than the universal scope of equality-valuing consequentialism, because only the inequalities produced by individuals' positive actions are deemed to be bad, as opposed to all inequality which exists. However, it still places moral weight on equality, and so is another example of a moral theory which cares about both equality and people.

In conclusion, while a consequentialist with person-affecting views cannot place intrinsic value on equality, it is nonetheless possible for those of other moral persuasions to care about equality in addition to facts about individuals. It is not a problem for them that a more equal distribution of wellbeing may benefit nobody, because their theories leave open the door for something to be good without it benefitting any person.

Bibliography

Brown, C. (2003). Giving Up Levelling Down. *Economics and Philosophy*, 19(1), 111-134.

Otsuka, M., & Voorhoeve, A. (2009). Why It Matters That Some Are Worse Off Than Others: An Argument against the Priority View. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 37(2), 171-199.

Parfit, D. (1997). Equality and Priority. *Ratio*, 10(3), 202-221.

Commented [HW14]: Why the focus on ideal utilitarianism, as against pluralism more broadly?

Commented [HW15]: Again, better to use consistent terminology

Commented [RS16]: Hmm, thinking about it again now, this seems not really like you intrinsically value equality. It is a correlate / product of the thing you care about (just actions), but not the thing itself.

Commented [RS17R16]: Also, the idea that “badness inheres in the relational property of some being less well off than others” (Otsuka & V) is a consequentialist view, I think, but it’s then a bit confusing that they talk about how “inequality is intrinsically bad when and because it is unfair” in relation to this – since unfairness is what I’d associate with the Deontic View (per Parfit).

Commented [RS18R16]: (Additionally confusing because people often say that deontology is about the “right sort of relations” bearing between people)

Commented [HW19R16]: I think it fits reasonably well with either the deontic or telic view. You might think fairness is a feature of an act that it’s unfair or a feature of the state of affairs that results from the act.

Commented [RS20]: Except it doesn’t claim that increasing equality is always good: cf the fact that - attractively! - it is immune to the Levelling Down Objection. So either I need to retreat from this claim, or change my operationalisation of “caring about” earlier. Maybe the latter is better.

Commented [HW21R20]: I don’t see the problem here. A theory can give moral weight to something / assign intrinsic value to a good while also doing the same to something else as well.

Commented [HW22]: No need to worry about including bibliographies for these weekly essays.