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# Are egalitarians really vulnerable to the Levelling-Down Objection and the Divided World Example?

*S. Subramanian*

**Abstract:** This essay is a quick critique of one aspect of Derek Parfit's criticism of Egalitarianism in his larger consideration of the claims of, and distinction between, Prioritarianism and Egalitarianism. It reviews issues relating to the 'Levelling Down Objection' and the 'Divided World Example'. More specifically, it is argued that the Levelling Down Objection is a serious problem only for Pure Telic Egalitarianism, not for Pluralist Telic Egalitarianism; and that even in a Divided World, one can have an egalitarian justification for preferring an equal distribution of a smaller sum of wellbeing to an unequal distribution of a larger sum. By these means, it is contended that Parfit's claim of the vulnerability of Egalitarianism to the Levelling Down Objection and the Divided World Example is not sustainable.

**Keywords:** pure and pluralist telic egalitarianism, deontic egalitarianism, prioritarianism

## Motivation

Derek Parfit's (1997) essay on priority and equality suggests that egalitarianism is vulnerable to what he calls the Levelling Down Objection and the Divided World Example. This is a source of potential concern for economists and philosophers who regard themselves in the light of egalitarians. How much of an actual concern to egalitarians should Parfit's criticism be? The present note is an attempt by an economist to respond to this query.

It should be clarified that there is no specific 'economist's case', as such, that is pushed in this note. Rather, the question is one of putting to work, in the cause of clarifying a philosophical problem, a general approach of 'formalism' and 'precision' which has come to be associated with mainstream economics. More specifically, and with reference to the present context, it appears that Parfit's critique of egalitarianism can be meaningfully addressed by taking care to define the notion of 'pluralist telic egalitarianism' in a reasonably clear, transparent, and self-contained manner, as is sought to be done in this note. This does not entail the use of mathematics, leave alone higher mathematics; but it does underline the utility of minimizing ambiguity in the use of language, and of stating one's claim more rather than less precisely, so as to promote the chances of the claim being challenged without being misunderstood.

This note is primarily substantive, not methodological, in orientation. Nevertheless, it may be useful to briefly complete the methodological point flagged in the preceding paragraph. Deirdre McCloskey (2002) has pointed to two besetting sins to which economics is prone: the sin of 'qualitative theorems' and the sin of 'statistical significance', which together are held to serve poorly the cause of thought and observation as a means to an understanding of the world in which we live. Confining oneself to the first of these identified sins, it may be noted that a cardinal feature of 'qualitative theorems' is the emphasis on precision and formalism, such as is characteristic of the axiomatic method pursued in much of this tradition. It should not be hard to see that 'qualitative theorems' of the variety which economics abounds in constitute a sin when they purport to be descriptions about the real world. But can, and do, 'qualitative theorems' serve other purposes than as (sadly deficient) descriptions or explanations of actual economic phenomena on the ground?

Many would suggest 'yes'. Frank Hahn's (1973) essay on Janos Kornai's critique of General Equilibrium Theory (GET) is a case in point. Hahn suggests that if it were not for the fundamental and formal results of Arrow-Debreu GET, it would be hard to undermine the wisdom of the 'folk theorem' underlying Adam Smith's Invisible Hand account of the economy: it is thanks to the precision and care of the Arrow-Debreu formulation of the problem that we are enabled, so easily, to see the essentially profoundly unreal conditions under which the basic theorems of welfare economics hold. Partha Dasgupta (2002) makes a similar point about the prolonged debate on Marx's account of how to solve the problem of determining the exchange value of a commodity, and invites Marxist scholars

to provide an intelligible formalization of Marx that would advance the possibility of both understanding and debate.

The point can be made even more forcefully in the context of 'normative' reasoning and the tradition of internal criticism in economics. Consider the case of the apparently plausible 'compensation' criteria that were a prominent feature of the 'new' welfare economics of the 1930s and 1940s: it took a good deal of careful formal work to unravel the logical problems associated with these criteria. More generally, the entire programme of the 'new' welfare economics, with its emphasis on assessing the goodness of alternative states of the world solely on the basis of data on the ordinal and interpersonally non-comparable utilities of the individuals constituting a society, was effectively derailed by Kenneth Arrow's (1963) General Possibility Theorem – itself a product of a careful formalization of the (often vaguely verbal) claims and assumptions permeating the 'new' welfare economics.

So, if there is any 'methodological' point to the present essay, then it relates to the restricted claim that while a considerable quantity of 'mainstream' economics (arguably) employs mathematics or formalism in the cause of pretentious and hollow 'theorem-mongering', there are also constructive uses to which the tradition (or habit) of formalization can be put. One of these is to clarify the basis of claims made in positive and normative reasoning, and thereby to advance the possibility of disagreement founded in understanding rather than misunderstanding. This note is an effort at illustrating this point of view in the context of a philosophical problem concerning egalitarianism raised by Derek Parfit. The rest of the note will be devoted entirely to a substantive consideration of this problem.

## **The problem**

An aspect of Parfit's thesis can be summarized along the following lines. There are situations in which, though one may be disposed to judge an equitable distribution with a smaller sum of well-being to be superior to a less equitable distribution with a larger sum of well-being, there is really no egalitarian argument available to rationalize such a judgment. An egalitarian argument must be based on either (a) the view that an equal distribution of benefits is, in itself, good; or (b) the view that striving for equality, on grounds of justice or

fairness (or some other value) is the right thing to do. Egalitarians of persuasion (a) are *Telic* Egalitarians, and those of persuasion (b) are *Deontic* Egalitarians.

The view that equality is, in itself, a good thing cannot plausibly be maintained in the face of the Levelling Down Objection, which is the objection that there is no respect in which a change for greater equality achieved by simply dragging the better-off down to the level of the worse-off can be good. This leaves one with the Deontic Egalitarian argument to deal with. Here, however, one can conceive of situations in which a distribution may be unequal but the inequality cannot be attributed to any failure of justice or fairness, etc., nor are there any unfavourable effects following from the inequality. A situation with these features is encapsulated in an account of what Parfit calls the Divided World Example.

In this Example, one has (as it were), two Worlds – World 1 and World 2, which are hermetically sealed and insulated from each other (in the sense that neither World has any knowledge of the other's existence). Each world consists of  $n$  persons. Now consider three distributions  $\mathbf{p} \equiv (100, 200)$ ,  $\mathbf{q} \equiv (145, 145)$ , and  $\mathbf{r} \equiv (150, 150)$ , where  $\mathbf{p}$  is to be understood as representing a distribution in which each person in World 1 receives a benefit of 100 units of well-being and each person in World 2 receives a benefit of 200 units; and  $\mathbf{q}$  and  $\mathbf{r}$  are to be analogously interpreted. The problem presented by the Divided World Example is to rank the distributions  $\mathbf{p}$  and  $\mathbf{q}$ . Parfit suggests that it would be reasonable to pronounce  $\mathbf{q}$  as being a better distribution than  $\mathbf{p}$ , though there may be no egalitarian justification available for this preference. In particular, in the Divided World, Deontic Egalitarianism is of no avail in supporting a preference for the equal distribution with a smaller mean over the unequal distribution with a larger mean (on which see Parfit 1997: 'since the two groups are unaware of each other's existence, this inequality was not deliberately produced, or maintained. Since this inequality does not involve wrong-doing, there is no injustice.') Such a preference requires some view, other than an Egalitarian one, to rationalize it. Parfit's rationalization is in terms of what he calls the Priority View.

In this note, the concern will not be with the merits of the Priority View, nor even with what the Priority View *is*, but only with the alleged vulnerability of egalitarianism to the Levelling Down Objection and the Divided World Example, which necessitates the quest for some other (non-Egalitarian) view,

such as the Prioritarian View. In what follows, the question is first addressed of whether the force of the Levelling Down Objection is as compelling as it may appear to be. Second, some reservations one could entertain about the reach of the Divided World Example are discussed. The line of reasoning pursued in this note shares similarities with that employed in Christiano and Braynen (2008).

## On the Levelling Down Objection

Parfit claims that the Levelling Down Objection is an embarrassment to those whom he calls Telic Egalitarians. A closer look at the issue, however, suggests that this claim is valid only for those whom he calls Pure Telic Egalitarians, and not for those whom he calls Pluralist Telic Egalitarians. Both kinds of Telic Egalitarian are seen as subscribing to the *Principle of Equality*, which is the principle that 'it is in itself bad if some people are worse off than others' (Parfit 1997). The distinction between Pure and Pluralist Telic Egalitarians is spelt out in the following terms by Parfit (1997):

If we cared only about equality, we would be *Pure* Egalitarians. If we cared only about utility, we would be Utilitarians. Most of us accept a pluralist view: one that appeals to more than one principle or value. According to *Pluralist Egalitarians*, it would be better both if there was more equality, and if there was more utility. In deciding which of two outcomes would be better, we give weight to both these values.

The above suggests that there are different ways in which one can give content to the view that 'it is in itself bad if some people are worse off than others'. These different ways then serve to provide a taxonomy of Telic Egalitarians. It is not just useful but essential to a proper understanding of the claims of egalitarianism to try and state the distinctions involved as sharply, clearly, and precisely as possible (a point discussed in the introductory section of this note). It would also be fair to permit the distinctions to work in such a way that differentiation is achieved through a specification of what is minimally required in order to mark the relevant, and crucial, point of departure. With this in mind, the following characterizations of the Pure and the Pluralist Telic Egalitarian are offered. It seems reasonable to believe that these characterizations, although parsimoniously effected, are compatible with Parfit's descriptions. It is important to underline that there are no ready-made, 'officially sanctioned' definitions or characterizations available: what are here provided, one can claim, are adequate to their purpose and, in particular, one

could assert that it would simply be coercive to *require* of a Pluralist Telic Egalitarian that she embrace any belief beyond what has been attributed to her in the ensuing description.

*Pure Telic Egalitarianism* requires that, given any two equi-dimensional distributions of well-being, the more equal distribution be judged to be the better one.

*Pluralist Telic Egalitarianism* requires that, given any two equi-dimensional distributions of well-being with the same sum-total of well-being, the more equal distribution be judged to be the better one; and given any two equal equi-dimensional distributions of well-being, the distribution with the larger sum-total of well-being be judged to be the better one. (In the interests of brevity, certain reasonable qualifications are here suppressed. One such *caveat*, for instance, would be that the preference for equality could be waived in a 'life-boat dilemma' sort of situation wherein the average level of well-being is less than what may be required to achieve 'survival', or some minimally acceptable human life.)

Let  $\mathbf{v} = (10, 100)$  and  $\mathbf{w} = (10, 10)$  be two 2-person distributions of well-being.  $\mathbf{w}$  can be seen to have been derived from  $\mathbf{v}$  through a 'levelling down' of one person's well-being. A Pure Telic Egalitarian is committed to judging that  $\mathbf{w}$  is a better distribution than  $\mathbf{v}$ . The Pluralist Telic Egalitarian is, however, not committed to any such judgment, since  $\mathbf{v}$  and  $\mathbf{w}$  do not share the same sum-total of well-being. For the same reason, the Pluralist Telic Egalitarian is not even committed to the judgment that  $\mathbf{w}$  is a better distribution than  $\mathbf{v}$  in *some* way: she is being asked to compare two distributions which do not meet the requirements under which she feels she can, given her beliefs, plausibly undertake a comparison. She can legitimately counter the charge that she is compromising her professed belief in the *intrinsic* value of equality by responding thus: 'It is perfectly consistent for me to maintain that inequality, in itself, is bad, *in the sense and to the extent*, that an equal distribution of a given sum-total of well-being is better than an unequal distribution. I am in no way guilty of a violation of this claim if I refuse to pronounce that  $\mathbf{w}$  is, in *some* way, a better distribution than  $\mathbf{v}$ . I may add that the way in which the claim is addressed amounts to a non-trivial deference to the demands of equality – such as would not, for instance, be accommodated by a principle of the type of sufficientarianism'. One may respond to this by insisting that for a person to

qualify for the description of 'Egalitarian', she would have to go beyond judgments on equity relating to fixed-sum distributions, and be prepared to endorse the view, in different-sum comparisons, that one distribution is better than the other in *one* respect, that of equality – thus, presumably, paving the way for the charge of discerning some virtue in Levelling Down. Such a response strikes this author as being somewhat perverse: it is a little like insisting that not swearing is a requirement of decency, the better, subsequently, to castigate a well-spoken person for his priggishness! There is an element of the Double Bind here, which is entirely avoidable. And once it is avoided, it becomes clear that the Levelling Down Objection applies only to the Pure Telic Egalitarian. But this in itself spells no trouble for egalitarianism in general, nor even for Telic Egalitarianism in general. A Pure Telic Egalitarian is clearly some kind of fanatic, as one must expect a Pure Anything to be. One specific variety of egalitarian does not speak for all egalitarians. Arising from this, one is not obliged to see the Levelling Down Objection as constituting a particularly compelling problem for egalitarians (considered in their generality) to contend with.

Parfit, however, seems to believe that all of Telic Egalitarianism is disposed of by the Levelling Down Objection. His line of reasoning, leading up to his Priority View, seems to be as follows.

- (a) Egalitarianism can be Telic or Deontic.
- (b) The Divided World Example does not afford the Deontic Egalitarian any equality-related argument for judging outcome **q** to be better than outcome **p**, though intuition (to begin with), and subsequent consideration (entailing a conversion to the Priority View), may suggest that outcome **q** is to be preferred.
- (c) An Egalitarian preference for outcome **q**, then, can be attributed only to Telic Egalitarianism, that is, to belief in the Principle of Equality which asserts that inequality, in itself, is bad.
- (d) But the Levelling Down Objection is an Objection to the Telic view.
- (e) Consequently, neither Telic nor Deontic Egalitarianism, whose union constitutes Egalitarianism, can deliver the judgment that outcome **q** is to be preferred to outcome **p**.

If (a) – (e) is a fair summary of Parfit's line of reasoning, then the flaw in it should be apparent: (d) is the weak link in the chain. Proposition (d) ['the Levelling Down Objection is an Objection to the Telic view'] has not in fact been



established by Parfit: he has demonstrated that the *Pure Telic* view could fall foul of the Levelling Down Objection. This is not to assert that the *Pluralist Telic* view (such as has been presented here, and sought to be justified) has anything to commend (or oppose) it, only that Parfit's case against it is not known.

## On the Divided World Example

Further, one can question the view that the Divided World Example does not afford an egalitarian any equality-related argument for judging outcome **q** to be better than outcome **p**. Recalling that a *Pluralist Telic Egalitarian* is not necessarily undone by the Levelling Down Objection, it is open to such an egalitarian to invoke distribution  $\mathbf{r} \equiv (150, 150)$  which, in view of her belief that an equal distribution of a given sum of well-being is preferable to an unequal distribution, she will prefer to the distribution  $\mathbf{p} = (100, 200)$ . In view also of her belief that of two equal distributions of well-being the one with the larger sum of well-being is preferable, she will prefer  $\mathbf{r} = (150, 150)$  to  $\mathbf{q} = (145, 145)$ . It is, further, reasonable for this *Pluralist Telic Egalitarian* to suggest that she has a mild preference for **r** over **q** because the latter, in comparison with the former, reflects a relatively small sacrifice of total well-being at a given level of equality, and that she has a strong preference for **r** over **p** because the latter, in comparison with the former, reflects a relatively large sacrifice of equality at a given level of total well-being. Since the extent to which this *Egalitarian* prefers **r** over **p** is greater than the extent to which she prefers **r** over **q**, she has a defensible egalitarian reason for preferring **q** over **p** – even in a World that is Divided.

## Concluding note

Though the affectations and conceits of economics as an imitator of physics have often (and in a number of cases justly) attracted adverse criticism, there is at least one area of application - that of normative economics (with particular reference to issues of deprivation, disparity, welfare, and rationality) - in which the axiomatic method employed by economics, and its general commitment to a certain order of precision in the use of language, have indeed been helpful for both (a) conducting internal critiques of economics; and (b) assessing the soundness of claims made in related disciplines such as philosophy. This note's

substantive critique of the prioritarian quarrel with egalitarianism is an application of this general proposition. The essay has been concerned to show that there is a non-trivial way in which the notion of (pluralist) Telic Egalitarianism can be defined such that it attends to the virtues of both size and distribution in comparisons of alternative regimes of well-being. Such a view of Telic Egalitarianism upholds the view that inequality, in itself, is bad, while subscribing also to the view that – other things equal – an outcome with more well-being is preferable to one with less well-being. A crucial feature of this perfectly defensible conception of egalitarianism is that it entails no commitment to the view that any equal distribution is preferable to any unequal distribution in at least one respect, that of equality. As such, the conception is proof against the strictures of the Levelling Down Objection. Furthermore, and as has been shown in the note, the formulation of Telic Egalitarianism advanced here enables one to present an egalitarian justification for preferring an equal distribution of a smaller sum total of well-being to an unequal distribution of a larger sum total, even within the potentially problematic context of Parfit's Divided World setting. It seems fair to conclude that, all things considered, the Levelling Down Objection and the Divided World Example are not, after all, fatal worries for the ethic of egalitarianism.

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