The value of equality*

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Abstract

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

Keywords: Egalitarianism; prioritarianism; leximin, Pigou-Dalton principle, non-aggregation; separability; transitivity

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1 Introduction

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

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

A specific case in point is the recent philosophical debate on equality versus priority. Many economists think that there is nothing new in this debate, whereas philosophers feel that there is still a need for clarification. Is this because the philosophers have missed the economic literature on equality or is it because the economists do not capture the subtleties involved? As an economist, I will make an attempt to answer this question, by studying in more detail some of the central philosophical arguments in this debate. Actually, this project will move us beyond the question about the usefulness of the distinction between egalitarianism and prioritarianism, and into all the challenges listed above. But there will be more challenges left untouched. The philosophical literature on egalitarianism is full of suggestions and ideas worthwhile of study, and it is obviously impossible to deal with all of them in

one paper.[1] Hence, I will have to narrow myself to what I consider the most pressing points. And I hope to show that on these issues both philosophers and economists can learn from each other, even though this does not necessarily imply a change of viewpoint. What it probably will imply, though is that we have a more thorough understanding of the kind of egalitarianism we eventually defend.

Egalitarians are concerned with a number of different inequalities; political, legal, social, and economic (Nagel, 1979). However, in most of the present debate on egalitarianism and prioritarianism, the framework has been narrowed down to a comparison of distributions of well-being (Parfit, 1995).[2] This is not an uncontroversial narrowing of the problem at hand, as stressed by Scanlon (1998) in his discussion of the framework of contractualism.[3]

> "Contractualism is not based on the idea that there is a 'fundamental level' of justification at which only well-being (conceived in some particular way) matters and the comparison of magnitudes of well-being is the sole basis for assessing the reasonableness of rejecting principles of right and entitlement. Even though components of well-being figure prominently as grounds for reasonable rejection, the idea of such a fundamental level is misleading on two counts. First, the claim that the possibility of suffering a loss in well-being is something that has force in moral argument is a substantive moral claim. By concealing or minimizing this fact, the idea of a fundamental level has the effect of giving these claims a privileged status over other moral considerations. In many cases, gains and losses in well-being (relief from suffering, for example)

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

[2] We will follow this route in the paper, and avoid a discussion of the appropriate understanding of well-being (see for example Scanlon, 1993). Moreover, we will assume that there are no informational biases, such that we have a quantitative notion of well-being. This is in contrast to much of the economic literature in this field, where the focus has been on the implications of informational constraints on our understanding of egalitarianism; see Bossert and Weymark (1999) for a survey.

[3] See also Wolff (2000) for a critical view of this approach.

> are clearly the most relevant factors determining whether a principle could or could not be reasonably rejected. And in some cases of this kind questions of responsibility - such as whether the sufferer's claim to aid might be undermined by the fact that it was his or her own fault - do not arise, either because it so obviously was not the person's fault or because it would not matter if it were. But...to identify a case as of this kind is to place it within a specific moral framework, not to view it without any moral assumptions" (pp. 214-215).

However, I will stay within this more narrow moral framework and consider how undeserved, nonvoluntary inequalities of well-being in a society affect our evaluation of various distributions.[4] Moreover, I will assume that our framework satisfies a minimal condition of anonymity, saying that the identity of an individual should not influence on our reasoning.[5]

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

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

A reduction in inequality may among other things alleviate suffering, the feeling of inferiority, the dominance of some over the lives of others, and in many cases these effects are of sufficient importance to motivate our concern for the alleviation of inequality.[6] But still most of us think that there are reasons for caring about equality that are independent of its instrumental value? In section 2, I discuss different ways

[4]In other words, we only consider "welfaristic" theories, see Blackorby, Donaldson, and Weymark (1984) for a more formal discussion.

[5]If we consider two alternatives $x = (1, 2, 3)$ and $y = (2, 1, 3)$, where each position reflects the well-being of a particular person, then the minimal condition of anonymity is saying that we should be indifferent between x and y.

[6]See Anderson (1999).

of justifying the intrinsic value of equality, which also clarifies the general context of the following analysis. The main objection to egalitarianism is analysed in section 3. I reject this objection, and hence I believe that the intrinsic value of equality should play a role in our social evaluations. But it needs to be combined with other values, and section 4 contains a discussion of how this may be done. There are alternative ways of defending an equal distribution, and in section 5 I provide a discussion of prioritarianism and how this perspective relates to egalitarianism. It has also been argued that a main implication of a concern for equality is that we should endorse non-aggregative reasoning (though not necessarily the leximin principle), and this view is explored in section 6. In section 7, I provide a critical discussion of some of the basic features of the framework used in the discussion, whereas section 8 contains concluding remarks.

2 The Intrinsic Value of Equality

Many people consider inequality intrinsically bad or unjust. Parfit (1995) names these positions telic and deontic egalitarianism, respectively. But how can we defend them? And what is the difference? Is it possible to be a telic egalitarian without being a deontic egalitarian or vice versa? These questions turn out to be of importance for our further discussion of the structure of egalitarianism, and hence we will look into them more closely in this section.

Why should I be a telic egalitarian? In other words, why should I consider inequality bad? Some people suggest that this is a misplaced question:

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

However, there is an obvious reason for *wanting* to elaborate on the badness of inequality, and McKerlie (op.cit., p. 278) observes this reason as well. It is a fact that the claim that suffering is bad coheres strongly with our considered judgments, whereas the claim that inequality is bad is more controversial.

But how can we add plausibility to the claim that inequality is bad? One way of substantiating telic egalitarianism is to appeal to deontic egalitarianism, to wit to argue that inequality is bad because it is unjust. But that is not the kind of badness Parfit (1995) has in mind when he defines telic egalitarianism. He does not reject the possibility of viewing injustice as a special kind of badness (p. 9), but argues that we should define telic egalitarianism as the position claiming that inequality is bad even in cases where the question of justice does not arise. If we link injustice to wrong-doing (op.cit, p. 9), then the case that most clearly separates the two views is the case where inequality cannot be avoided. Telic egalitarians would still consider this inequality bad. Temkin (1993, p. 14) phrases this natural justice, but means simply by this that something is bad if we would have some (pro tanto) moral reason to alleviate the inequality if it *were* possible for us to do so.

Roughly speaking, there are two ways of understanding the badness of inequality. In my view, the most promising approach is to take as a point of departure the fundamental idea of equal moral status of people, and then argue that an equal distribution is valuable because it captures this fundamental equality in at least one relevant dimension.[7] In other words, if x is more equal than y, then a telic egalitarian can argue that this provides a reason to promote x (and not y) because the distribution in x better expresses the moral equality of people. However, as stressed by among others Nagel (1979) and Sen (1992), there are other ways of expressing the moral equality of people, and we will return to the link between these approaches and egalitarianism later in the paper. Presently, it is sufficient to notice that telic egalitarianism is one plausible candidate in this respect.

Alternatively, we may understand the badness of inequality as a general claim about value *without* linking this claim to the moral equality of people. This seems to be the strategy of (among others) Parfit (1995) and McKerlie (1996). McKerlie (1996, p. 275) suggests that inequality between people can be bad in the same way as suffering or deprivation inside one life is bad. I have doubts about such an approach. It makes sense to me to say that suffering is bad, without taking the moral equality

[7]See also Hausman (2001).

of the agents in question as the point of departure. Actually, I think it is bad that for example animals suffer, but I reject assigning the same moral status to animals as to people. However, it would be strange to suggest that an equal distribution of well-being among animals and people would be good a thing.[8] In my view, any defence of equality as a good thing - contrary to for example happiness - would have to be motivated by the want of an appropriate expression of the moral equality of people.

This view is closely related to the perspective outlined in Sen (1992, p. 17-19), but with some important differences. Sen is concerned with the fact that it seems like any plausible ethical theory of social arrangements will have to show equal consideration at some level.[9] I agree, and I believe that this reflects the view that we cannot have a plausible ethical theory that completely ignores the moral equality of people. In other words, to pay some attention to the moral equality of people is a side constraint for any theory of this kind. But this does not imply that the *sole* aim of any ethical theory would have to be to express the moral equality of people. Nagel (1979, p. 112) and Kymlicka (1990, p. 44) suggest that this should be the case, but I believe that to be too strong a claim about the appropriate form of normative reasoning. It is important to clarify what are proper expressions of

[8]For the present purpose, it is not necessary to discuss whether it actually makes sense to compare the well-being of people and animals.

[9]Kolm (1996, 1997) defends equal treatment of equals as a requirement of rationality. His defence consists of two steps. First, he argues that this requirement or reason supports a fully rational choice, because it provides justification for a *unique* outcome. Second, he argues that *any* other reason justifying unequal treatment implies irrationality, by providing support for more than one alternative. These alternatives are permuted states that are indistinguishable from the point of view of justice, and hence there will be no reason for choosing one rather than the other. In other words, we are forced to make an irrational choice. However, Kolm underlines that this only provides a prima facie defence of equality.

> "The above reasoning thus shows that there is a prima facie reason in favour of equality and against inequality, which results from the very requirement of rationality. Of course, for a given type of items, other reasons may also be present and relevant, and they may in the end lead to another choice. These possible impediments consist of the actual possibilities, and of the consideration of other valued aspects of the situation that may either not refer to justice for these justiciables or imply ideal equalities in other items" (1996, p. 38).

moral equality. But there are other values that should be allowed to play a role in normative reasoning. When I am concerned with suffering in a society, it is not only because the distribution in this society (possibly) does not express the moral equality of people. It is also because I think that suffering is bad more generally. And I believe that this is why Sen (1992, p. 19) writes that "justification *frequently* [my emphasis] takes the form of showing the integral connection of that inequality with equality in some *other* important - allegedly *more* important space", and does not demand that this should always be the case. What I believe should *always* be the case, though, is that any justification of inequality would have to include showing the integral connection of that inequality with equality in some other space which provides a *sufficiently* good expression of the moral equality of people and moreover an account of what other values make us seek anything but the best representation of moral equality.

Telic egalitarians, I shall say, value equality in the distribution because it reflects the moral equality of people in a relevant way.[10] But they accept the need to balance this aspect of goodness against other dimensions of the alternatives in question, which we will return to in the next section. Presently, let us compare telic egalitarianism with deontic egalitarianism. Deontic egalitarians claim that inequality is unjust, because justice demands equal treatment of people that stand in a relationship of justice (Parfit, 1995, p. 8).[11] But what is really the difference here? First, is this an all things considered claim about justice? Or should a deontic egalitarian be willing to balance comparative justice against other dimensions of justice? In particular, should efficiency considerations be part of an all things considered judgment about *justice?* Some people strongly reject this possibility. By way of illustration, Cohen (2000) agrees that it might be right to choose efficient institutions in society, but he rejects the claim that these institutions are just. In his view, justice is equal treatment, and there is no room for balancing this against efficiency considerations.

Others reject this position, and accept that justice can be the outcome of a more general trade-off between considerations of efficiency and comparative justice. In that case, deontic egalitarianism would be equivalent to telic egalitarianism, to wit

[10]Is it possible not to be a telic egalitarian? If we endorse the moral equality of people, then how can we reject that the space of well-being is one relevant and valuable way of expressing this equality?

[11]In this paper, I only consider the idea of a deontological constraint imposed on distributive justice; not other kinds of deontological constraints.

that it would capture one dimension of the consideration in question. However, if we accept this approach, then how do we make a distinction between considerations of justice and considerations of goodness? Or to put it in the language of Scanlon's (1998) view on value (which I assume also covers the value of justice). How do we make a distinction between lower-order properties of goodness and justice?

> "The alternative, which I believe to be correct, is to hold that being good, or valuable, is not a property that itself provides a reason to respond to a thing in certain ways. Rather, to be good or valuable is to have other properties that constitute such reasons. Since the claim that some property constitutes a reason is a normative claim, this account also takes goodness or value to be non-natural properties, namely the purely formal, higher-order properties of having some lower-order properties that provide reasons of the relevant kind" (p. 97).[12]

Broome (1991) questions the possibility of making a distinction between reasons relevant for justice and goodness respectively, and suggests a definition of teleology by structure.

> "Teleological ethics, then, says there is an ordering of acts that determines the acts' rightness. And this is actually enough to *define* teleological ethics. Any ethical theory with this implication is teleological. I am defining teleology, then, by its *structure*" (p. 12).

Hence, according to Broome, when we face a distributive conflict among people standing in a relationship of justice, we are unable to make a further distinction between considerations of justice and goodness?[13] Of course, the fact that we (possibly) only view the distribution problem within a subgroup of all people establishes that this is at most a partial consideration of overall goodness (which more generally must take into account the conditions of all people). But within this group, Broome argues that the just distribution is the best distribution (and vice versa). Scanlon (1998) also seems to recognize the plausibility of this view.

[12]I will not have anything to say about whether these lower-order properties must have some subjective conditions or not. As I see it, nothing in this paper depends on our view on this issue.

[13]To establish when people stand in a relationship of justice is a difficult issue in itself, which will not be discussed in this paper.

> "Indeed, one may wonder whether, once it is recognized that a teleological conception of value can assign intrinsic value to actions as well as to their consequences, and that this value need not be impartial or additive, there is any content left to the bare idea of a teleological structure. It may seem that no significant difference remains between a teleological conception of value and a non-telelogical structure" (p. 81).

As I see it, if we move beyond Cohen's view of the concept of justice, the most fundamental difference between deontic and telic egalitarianism is that deontic egalitarianism takes as a point of departure that some people stand in a relationship of justice whereas telic egalitarianism is derived from the idea that we are all morally equal. Hence, telic egalitarianism applies more widely. This is also acknowledged by Parfit (1995), who argues that the main difference between these two approaches is with respect to scope. But I'll suggest that this difference is of less importance than frequently assumed, because it is very hard to see that anyone can be deontic egalitarians without being telic egalitarians (and vice versa). If you acknowledge that an equal distribution should enter into your consideration about how to treat people standing in a relationship of justice to yourself, then how can you avoid endorsing the claim that more generally equality is good because *in at least one relevant way* it expresses the moral equality of people (see also McKerlie, 1996, p. 277)? Similarly, if you accept the general claim of telic egalitarians, then how can you reject that equal treatment should be considered just *in at least one respect*?

However, I am not suggesting that the two views coincide (Parfit, 1995, p. 13). They may, but that is not my point (and would depend on when we think people stand in a relationship of justice). What I reject is the claim of Parfit (op.cit., p. 18) that it is important to determine whether you are a telic egalitarian or a deontic egalitarian. In my view, if you are an *egalitarian*, you are both deontic and telic egalitarian. Moreover, I believe like Temkin (1993) that telic egalitarianism has the upper hand.[14]

[14]McKerlie (1996) disagrees:

> "If the existence of the duty could be explained only by the badness of the resulting inequality then the deontological view would presuppose the teleological view. But I think that we can understand acknowledging the duty without explaining it in that way. We might object to treating people in different and unequal ways just because we think this is an unfair way to treat them. The differential treatment

> "My own view is that most concern about social inequality must ultimately ride piggyback on concern about natural inequality. It is difficult to see why social inequality would be bad per se if natural inequality were not" (p. 15).

In any case, in the rest of the paper I will not try to make a distinction between telic and deontic egalitarianism, and simply refer to *egalitarianism* as the formal reason saying that equality is intrinsically valuable within the present context. By doing this, I assume that any objection to telic egalitarianism is an objection to deontic egalitarianism as well, because it undermines a value that any deontic egalitarian necessarily needs to defend. In particular, when we now turn to the levelling down objection, I reject the suggestion by Parfit (1995, p. 18) that we may avoid this objection by moving from telic to deontic egalitarianism.

3 The Levelling Down Objection

An egalitarian supports the following principle of equality.

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

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

Temkin (1993, 2000) argues that the force of this argument is taken from a principle he names the slogan.

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

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will cause a difference between their lives, but we are not compelled to think that the difference is bad" (p. 289). Of course, we are not compelled to think that the difference is bad *all things considered*, but I find it hard to see that we should not find this difference bad *in one respect* if we think it is unfair!

On the basis of the slogan, we can defend the levelling down objection. In order to do this, however, we need to make a further assumption. We need to assume that it is *possible* to level down the better off without *benefitting the worse off in any respect.* If it is always the case that inequality is bad for the worse off in some respect, then it is not possible to level down without improving the situation for some in some respect. Consequently, the levelling down objection looses its force. If levelling down is good for some people in some respect, it seems trivial to argue that levelling down is generally good in some respect. In any case, there is no longer any link to the slogan.

Parfit (1995, p. 29) argues that the mere fact of inequality is not in itself bad for the people who are worse off.

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

I find this perspective plausible. It is hard to see that inequality should be bad for the worse off (in any respect) if they are not aware of this inequality.[15] At the

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

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

Temkin (2000a) is not supportive of this line of reasoning. He argues that this will save the

same time, egalitarians claim that this inequality makes the alternative bad in one respect, and hence we have a conflict with the slogan.

Should this objection cause us to give up egalitarianism or the slogan?[16] Temkin (2000a) argues at length that what we should give up is the slogan. Even though I endorse his general conclusion, I have trouble with some of the premises of this discussion. First, Temkin (op.cit., p. 11) suggests that the slogan underlies many arguments in economics. I am not sure about that. Actually, I have not seen any

slogan only by robbing it of its teeth.

> "Importantly, one might preserve the Slogan by adopting an Objective List Theory about self-interest and including on it those moral ideals to which people are committed. Specifically, with a broad enough Objective List Theory, any case in which one outcome is better or worse than another in any respect will also be a case in which there is someone for whom that outcome is better or worse in some respect. But...such a move will save the Slogan by robbing of its teeth. In particular, if it is an open question what factors or ideals will appear on the correct Objective List about self-interest - as it surely must be given the present state of argument about such issues - one cannot appeal to the Slogan to undermine any particular positions. After all, to do so would simply beg the question against whether the positions in question belong on the correct Objective List Theory about self-interest. Thus, even if the Slogan could be defended given a sufficiently broad Objective List Theory about self-interest, it would not serve any particular conclusions for which it has been invoked" (pp. 27-28).

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

However, this is not to endorse the view of Broome (1991), who argues that if injustice is bad then it is bad because it is bad for someone. My argument is that unjust treatment should be considered bad for people, but that does not rule out the possibility that unjust treatment can be bad *beyond* the fact that it is bad for people. I think it can, and this fact may be part of an argument that challenges a stronger (and probably more interesting) version of the slogan well known from economics. On the relationship between levelling down and our understanding of well-being, see also Wollf (2000).

[16]Or maybe revise the slogan slightly, see Holtung (1998).

economist explicitly supporting the slogan. Of course, this might be due to the fact that economists usually do not approach the problem at this level of analysis, but I doubt it. I suspect that most economists support what Broome (1991, p. 155) names the democratic version of the Pareto principle (if everyone prefers the first of two alternatives to the second, then the first should *come about*), and hence do not commit themselves to any particular view on the goodness of the alternatives. And I believe that most of them would be more than willing to reject the slogan without accepting that this should cause them to change their view on the Pareto principle. Second, Temkin (2000a) suggests that the difference principle of Rawls often is criticized by use of the slogan.

> "When [the difference principle] allows vast gains for the better-off to promote tiny gains for the worse-off, it is often defended by invoking the Slogan" (p. 12).

Is that really the case? To my knowledge, most people defend this by reference to the Pareto principle, and nothing else. And the same can be said about Temkin's reference to the theories of Nozick, Locke, and Scanlon, where Temkin argues that the force of these arguments follows from the implications that "if no one is worsened by the exchange, it cannot be bad" (op. cit., p. 12), "as long as there is no one for whom acquiring the property is worse, it cannot be bad" (op. cit., p. 13), and "there is nothing intrinsically bad about violating apparent rights when this benefits some and harms no one" (op. cit., p. 15). But these are all appeals to the Pareto principle and nothing else. Hence, only if there is a close link between the Pareto principle and the slogan is it reasonable to claim that the slogan (and not the Pareto principle) is a powerful, modern-day, Ockham's razor that carves out the domain of moral value (Temkin, 2000).

Let me elaborate by looking at the discussion in Temkin (1993, pp. 256-257), where different versions of the slogan are considered. One of these versions is actually equivalent to the Pareto principle, and Temkin explains here why he thinks the Pareto principle (or this version of the slogan) derives its appeal from the version of the slogan stated above.

> "After all, if one situation *could* be worse than another in some respect, even if there was no one from whom it was worse in even one

> respect (and hence all things considered), then why couldn't it be worse all things considered? Presumably the one situation *would* be worse than the other, all things considered, if there was no respect in which it was better, or if the respect(s) in which it was better were not sufficient to outweigh the respect(s) in which it was worse. Surely there is no a priori reason to rule out such possibilities if [the slogan] is false" (p. 257).

But there is no reason to rule out such possibilities even if the slogan is true! Still, there will be cases where one alternative is better all things considered for everyone, but worse in many respects. By way of illustration, consider a case where everyone is better off if we allow treatment that partly deprives some people's self-respect. In this case, the alternative is worse in one respect *overall*, and not only worse for some people in one respect. Hence, we need to weigh the respect(s) in which it is worse against the respect(s) in which it is better. The intuition of the Pareto principle is that in this exercise we should use the same weights as the people involved, and hence conclude that (in this case) unequal treatment should be endorsed. But this has *nothing* to do with the intuition covered by the slogan, which is that an alternative cannot be worse in some respect if it is worse for no one in any respect. Of course, if the slogan is wrong (which I think it is), then we have a set of cases where we cannot adopt the weights used by the individuals (because the new alternative is not worse for them in any respect). And it might be the case that in these situations we should reject the Pareto principle on the basis of this badness that is not reflected in the life of any person. Hence, the slogan may contribute to undermine the Pareto principle. But that is *not* the same as saying that the Pareto principle derives its appeal from the slogan. Even if the slogan were true would there be a need for justifying the way the Pareto principles balances gains and losses. And I will argue that the intuitive appeal of this principle is based on how it solves these cases, and not the cases covered by the slogan.

I believe that some version of the Pareto principle is the modern-day, Ockham's razor of moral reasoning, and in the next section I will discuss whether we should give up this principle on the basis of egalitarian reasoning.[17] In any case, I do not believe that we should give up the egalitarian perspective on the basis of the levelling down objection, as long as we define egalitarianism as saying that more equality makes

[17]There might be other ideals (not discussed in this paper) which should make us give up the Pareto principle, for example proportional justice. See Broome (1991) and Temkin (2000a).

society better *in one respect*. And I doubt, contrary to what some writers claim (see for example Parfit, 1995, p. 17 and McKerlie, 1994, p. 27), that many people are moved by this objection. I think that most people acknowledge the fact that an equal distribution is better in at least one dimension, even though it is worse for everyone. What they find hard to accept is that the badness of an unequal distribution should ever make us reject an alternative were everyone is better off.

4 Pluralist Egalitarianism

Let us assume that we reject the levelling down objection, and assign intrinsic value to equality. How should such a view be combined with other values in an all things considered evaluation? In particular, how should we combine this view with what we will name the weak principle of personal good.[18]

The Weak Principle of Personal Good: If one alternative is at least as good as another for everyone and definitely better for someone, it is better in one respect.

In general, there are three ways of combining the weak principle of personal good with the weak principle of equality if we want to establish a complete ranking of alternatives. First, we might assign absolute priority to the weak principle of personal good, which implies that we endorse the general principle of personal good.

The General Principle of Personal Good: If one alternative is at least as good as another for everyone and definitely better for someone, it is better.

Why are we egalitarian in this case? Because we accept that an increase in the well-being of the better off that does not make it worse for the worse off is worse in one respect, to wit there is more inequality. But we reject balancing these two dimensions in an all things considered evaluation.

Alternatively, we might assign absolute priority to the weak principle of equality. But this seems entirely implausible. Such a position would support the view that a situation where everyone has equally terrible lives is better - all things considered - than a situation where everyone lives good lives but there is minimum of inequality.

[18]The principle of personal good was introduced in Broome (1991). Structurally, it is equivalent to the Pareto principle, but it is stated in the space of individual good and not in the space of individual preferences. In this paper, we will refer to this principle as the general principle of personal good, in order to distinguish it from the weak principle of personal good.

Finally, we could support a view where we make trade-offs between the weak principle of equality and the weak principle of personal good. This seems to be the most common view in the literature. Parfit (1995) discusses this approach in some detail, where he makes a distinction between strong egalitarians and moderate egalitarians. Strong egalitarians sometimes violate the general principle of personal good, whereas moderate egalitarians never do that. Moderate egalitarians never think that the badness of inequality outweighs the gain in well-being from a move endorsed by the weak principle of personal good. Is that plausible? McKerlie (1996) does not think so.

> "There is a value - the value of a decrease in inequality - to weigh against the harm done to people, and there is no reason to think that this value would always be less important than the harm" (p. 287).

However, as observed by Parfit, there is a structural fact that adds plausibility to the claim of moderate egalitarians, namely that there can be much more inequality only if the better-off people gain a great deal. Hence, there are no cases where a small gain in well-being is accompanied by a large increase in the badness of inequality. And on the basis of this fact we may argue that the gain in well-being always outweighs the badness from increased inequality.

Broome (1991), however, does not endorse this kind of defence of the general principle of personal good.

> "The basis of this claim is the following argument. Suppose the slogan is false. Then there could be two situations A and B such that A is not worse than B for anyone in any respect, and yet in some respect A is worse than B. According to the principle of personal good, since A is not worse for anyone than B, A is not worse than B. Since it is worse than B in some respect, there must be some other respect in which it is better than B, and this must be enough to outweigh the respect in which it is worse. So the fact that A is not worse than B depends on the fortunate presence of a sufficiently important respect in which it is better than B. And how could we always rely on such a fortunate coincidence? If there can be cases where one alternative is worse than another in some respect, despite not worse for anybody in any respect, then surely there can also

> be cases where one alternative is worse than another *tout court*, despite not being worse for anybody in any respect. These would be cases in which the fortunate balancing respect did not appear. If the slogan is false, then, the truth of the [general] principle of personal good depends on a fortunate coincidence, which is surely undependable" (p. 183).

Hence, Broome rejects this kind of defence of moderate egalitarians. In his view, egalitarians should reject the slogan and accept the general principle of personal good, but this acceptance should not be the result of any balancing procedure.

> "She [that is the egalitarian] does, however, accept the [general] principle of personal good; she believes general good to be an increasing function of individual good. And just because she rejects the slogan, she will not feel any less secure in this principle. She believes, as a matter of principle, that general good depends only, and positively, on the good of individuals. In comparing A and B, she does not think that fortunately there is some respect in which A is better than B, which cancels out the respect in which it is worse. She does think inequality is a bad thing, and she thinks it a communal bad in the sense I have spelled out. She does think A is worse than B in one respect, though it is worse for nobody. But this respect is not one that has independent force in determining the general goodness of alternatives. General good depends only on the good of individuals" (p. 184).

I cannot find Broome's line of reasoning convincing. What does it mean that we accept this as a matter of principle? Why does not the badness of inequality have independent force? Broome suggests that the notion of a 'respect' is too equivocal to hang one's argument on. But why is it so? I find a 'respect' well-defined, it is a moral reason that counts in favour of one of the alternatives. So I think that the claim of Broome needs further elaboration to work as a defence of the general principle of personal good.

However, I share Broome's scepticism to moderate egalitarianism as the outcome of a balancing procedure of this kind. I don't think we should balance the two principles in cases of conflict. In my view, we should assign absolute priority to the weak principle of personal good in all conflicts with the weak principle of equality.

And the reason for this is that the weak principle of personal good provides a more fundamental expression of the moral equality of people than the weak principle of equality. The weak principle of personal good expresses moral equality according to the principle of unanimity, which by many have been considered an essential requirement of impartiality (Brink, 1993, p. 252). Nagel (1979, 1991) provides the clearest defence of an interpretation of moral equality in terms of *unanimity*.

> "Oddly enough, egalitarianism is based on a more obscure conception of moral equality than either of the less egalitarian theories....Something close to unanimity is being invoked...The essence of such a criterion is to try in a moral assessment to include each person's point of view separately, so as to achieve a result which is in a significant sense acceptable to each person involved or affected" (Nagel, 1979, pp. 116-123).

An unequal distribution where everyone is better off compared to an equal distribution is in a highly significant sense acceptable to all.[19] However, this does not

[19]However, we should have in mind that our discussion of these cases is extremely sensitive to our understanding of well-being, as stressed by Wolff (2000). If we have a rather narrow interpretation of well-being, then it might make sense to say that people find an equal distribution of well-being acceptable even though everyone is worse off compared to an unequal distribution. This is the kind of view suggested by Norman (1998).

> "[E]quality at a lower level of well-being might be seen as preferable to inequality at a higher level of well-being for everyone. Imagine an egalitarian community at a fairly low level of economic development whose members, though not experiencing great hardship or absolute poverty, have a simple life style. Given the opportunity of economic development which would make them all better off but introduce substantial inequalities, they might prefer to remain less prosperous but equal. I am not thinking here of the typical attendant evils of industrialisation such as crime and social conflict and environmental pollution which would enable us to explain their choice by saying that they would not really be better off. I am supposing that they would acknowledge that they would be better off with economic development, but still prefer equality...It is a preference for certain kinds of social relations. They may fear that, with greater inequality, they will become more distanced from one another...the more prosperous among them will be disdainful and supercilious and the less prosperous will become more servile and more resentful, and they will no longer be united by shared experience and a shared condition" (p. 51).

In that case, we need to include the preference for social relations in our understanding of well-

mean that moral equality is expressed in *all* significant dimensions of the problem. If there is more inequality, then the distribution of well-being fails to reflect the moral equality of people. And that is bad. But this badness is of secondary importance compared to the significance of expressing moral equality according to the principle of unanimity. In other words, the weak principle of personal good should have absolute priority in a conflict with the weak principle of equality, which is why we should always endorse the general principle of personal good.

Hence, I endorse the claim of egalitarians that inequality in the distribution is bad because it does not reflect the moral equality of people. But I believe there is a more fundamental way of expressing this moral equality, to wit by the weak principle of personal good, and on the basis of this egalitarians should accept the general principle of personal good. This does not mean that I endorse the claim of Broome (1991) that the badness of inequality does not have independent force in the determination of the goodness of alternatives. On the contrary, potentially I believe the badness of inequality to have tremendous force in cases of conflict, an issue I now turn to.

To see this, however, we have to clarify somewhat further our understanding of the concept of inequality. It is trivial to say that equality is better than inequality. But we need more than this. We need to compare the badness of different unequal distributions, in order to see how the weak principle of equality can be used to solve cases of conflict. There are many suggestions on this issue, but I will take as the point of departure the claim of Vallentyne (2000) that:

> "[a]ll plausible conceptions of equality hold that, where perfect equality does not obtain...any benefit (no matter how small) to a worst off person that leaves him/her still worst off person has priority (with respect to equality promotion) over any benefit (no matter how large) to a best off person" (p. 1).[20]

being in order to defend the weak principle of personal good on the basis of a concern for unanimity. As a response to such a move, Wolff (2000, p. 7) remarks that one of the main implications of a discussion of the structure of egalitarianism may be that we get a better understanding of the appropriate interpretation of the concept of well-being.

[20]See Temkin (1993) for a general philosophical discussion of the concept of equality, and on how this condition can be justified on the basis of individual complaints. Persson (forthcoming) and Rabinowicz (2001) provide some further reflection on Temkin's framework. Sen and Foster (1997)

This is a very weak claim about the concept of equality. But it turns out to have strong implications, if we accept some further conditions on normative reasoning. However, first we should notice an immediate consequence. If we assign absolute priority to *equality promotion* in cases of conflict, a position we can name *strict moderate egalitarianism*, then we would have to accept a *discontinuous* all things considered evaluation of the alternatives. No matter how much the best off person gains in a conflict with the worst off person, we should assign absolute priority to the worst off person on the basis of equality promotion. I stress this rather obvious implication for two reasons. First, it shows that in a discussion of egalitarianism, it is not at all trivial to assume that the all things considered relation is continuous. Economists often do that (see for example Ebert, 1987). Second, it indicates the close link between equality promotion and Rawlsian reasoning.

What about cases where there is a conflict between the worst off and people who are not the best off? Do we still have to give absolute priority to the worst-off if we are to promote equality? McKerlie (1994) does not think so.[21]

> "A change might give a small benefit to the very worst-off group, but cause a much larger loss for other groups that are also badly-off. The difference principle will support the change. Some people will think that the change would be wrong. If we oppose the change, we are choosing the better outcome in utilitarian terms, but *we are also preventing an increase in inequality* and avoiding serious harm to people who are badly off. If we find this objection convincing we will decide that the difference principle does not explain our distinctively egalitarian moral judgments" (pp. 28-29, my emphasis).

Consider *x=(2,10,100)* and *y=(1,100,100)*. This is the kind of case McKerlie has in mind. And many well-known inequality measures would provide support for the conclusion that there is more inequality in x than y. But it is not obvious that we should accept this conclusion. There is a very good reason for arguing in favour of the opposite view. In this case, the reduction in the well-being of the second worst off (when moving from y to x) causes a *decrease* in the distance between the second worst off and the worst off which is *equal* to the *increase* in distance between

and Cowell (2000) provide overviews of the economic approach to inequality measurement.

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

the second worst off and the best off. Which is worse? Of course, there are several plausible answers (Temkin, 1993). But to me it does not seem too implausible to argue that the isolation of the worst off at the bottom, from the point of inequality, outweighs the gain of having the second worst off getting equal to the best off.

Be that as it may. There is another problem here as well. If we accept the claim of transitivity in normative reasoning, then it turns out that we have to endorse the following maximin rule within *any* framework satisfying the general principle of personal good and the minimal restriction imposed on the concept of equality by Vallentyne.[22]

Maximin: If the level of well-being in the worst off position is strictly higher in one alternative than another, it is better all things considered.

Consequently, if we think (as McKerlie) that the maximin rule sometimes violates equality promotion, then we have an impossibility result. In that case, it is not possible to combine equality promotion and the general principle of personal good in a reasonable framework satisfying transitivity. Some people, like Temkin (1993) and Kolm (2000), reject an a priori assumption about transitivity, and I will elaborate on this issue in section 7. However, for those who accept this condition as a requirement of consistency, the maximin rule seems to be the only option.

Moreover, if we are willing to accept a further restriction on the concept of equality, then we can establish a complete link between strict moderate egalitarianism and the more general leximin principle.[23] Vallentyne (2000, p. 6) argues that equality is increased if there is a decrease in the well-being of a person above the mean who stays above the mean, an increase in the well-being of a person below the mean who stays below the mean, and no changes occur elsewhere in the distribution.[24] If we accept this suggestion, defends equality promotion in all cases of conflict and the

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

[23]The more general leximin principle states that if the worst off is indifferent, then we should assign absolute priority to the second worst off, and so on. For a critical discussion of the link between the leximin principle and the difference principle of Rawls, see Tungodden (1999). See also Van Parijs (2001) for a thorough discussion of the difference principle.

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

general principle of personal good, then we have a characterisation of the leximin principle within any framework satisfying transitivity and anonymity.[25]

In sum, I believe this shows that there is a very close link between equality promotion and Rawlsian reasoning. This has also been suggested by Barry (1989, pp 229-234), who recognizes that equality promotion should imply absolute priority to the worst off in a conflict with the best off. However, Barry's approach has been heavily criticized by McKerlie (1994).

> "Barry's argument breaks down at the last stage, when he tries to explain why we should choose the particular Pareto superior outcome that is best for the worst-off group...Any argument from equality to the difference principle faces the same problem. If we care about equality it is plausible to think that we object to inequality between any two groups for its own sake. How can we get from this starting-point to the conclusion that we should assess inequality only in terms of its effect on the worst off" (pp. 32-33).

If we accept transitivity in normative reasoning, then I have shown how we can get from this starting-point to the leximin principle, and hence why the leximin principle is an extremely plausible representation of strict moderate egalitarianism. Some readers will probably still reject, arguing that the leximin principle nevertheless violates equality promotion in some cases of conflict. Let me elaborate somewhat on how we can deal with this objection in relation to the maximin part of the leximin principle.

There are three possible responses (within a transitive framework). First, we may argue that the reader should give up his or her present ideas about how to measure the badness of inequality. The maximin result is based on a restriction of the concept of equality which no one can reject, and hence we should assign this restriction much more weight than our present intuitions about cases where we think that the maximin criterion violates equality promotion. In these cases, there are always reasonable counterarguments pointing in the direction suggested by the maximin principle, and thus there should be no doubt that we have to give the maximin approach the upper hand if we are to revise our understanding of equality on the basis of this result.

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

But we do not have to revise our conception of equality. There are two alternative interpretations. On the one hand, we can accept that this result shows us that the maximin principle is the most promising coherent framework that can be established if we assign absolute priority to equality promotion, because it is derived from our most firm believes about equality. But we may still think that this framework is imperfect, and that it sometimes violates equality promotion. Let me explain. Assume that the basic restriction on equality (that we all accept) tells us that x is better than y, and moreover that the general principle of personal good tells us that y is better than z. If we want a transitive relation, then we have to conclude that x is better than z. However, we may still insist that z is more equal than x, but accept that it is not possible to capture all our views on equality within a single coherent framework.[26] And we may think that the best among the many possible imperfect but coherent frameworks is the one that can be derived from our strongest believes about equality. On the other hand, we may reject this view as well, arguing in favour of a broader "second-best analysis" within the set of imperfect and coherent frameworks. We may think that there are other things than the violation of our strongest believes that should be taken into account in such an analysis. For example, if we have a number of other reasonably strong believes about equality promotion which all go against the maximin principle, then we might be willing to accept a violation of our strongest believes in order to satisfy these others believes. Hence, the result needs to be carefully interpreted. My favorite interpretation, though, is that we should revise our views on equality and accept the view that the maximin (and leximin) principle always promotes equality in cases of conflict.

There is another way of establishing an interesting link between equality promotion and the leximin principle, and that is by imposing the separability condition on the all things considered evaluation. Separability in the all things considered evaluation implies that the level of well-being of people who are indifferent does not influence our ranking of the alternatives. When doing this, it is important to keep in mind the distinction between a *reason* and an *all things considered evaluation*. It is clear that the egalitarian reason violates the claim of separability, but this does *not* imply that an egalitarian all things considered relation would have

[26]In other words, equality promotion is a pro tanto reason for preferring z to x, which does not loose its reason-giving force even if accept the framework where we all things considered conclude that x is better than z. For a further elaboration on this perspective, see our discussion of Hurley's (1989) defence of transitivity in section 7.

to do the same. First, no moderate egalitarian framework pays attention to the non-separability feature of the egalitarian reason in cases where there is no conflict. By way of illustration, consider the alternatives $x = (5, t, t)$ and $y = (10, t, t)$. Any moderate egalitarian framework concludes that y is better than x (from the general principle of personal good), whereas the egalitarian reason violates separability by saying that (from the point of equality) x is better than y when $t < 5$ and y is better than x when $t > 10$.

More importantly, a moderate egalitarian framework may violate the non-separability feature of egalitarianism in all cases of conflict as well. To see this, consider an example suggested by Broome (2001). We have four alternatives $c = (2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2)$, $d = (4, 1, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2)$, $e = (2, 2, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1)$, and $f = (4, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1)$. In this example, there is an egalitarian reason for preferring c to d which is not present in a comparison between e and f, to wit that c is equal and e is not. And again this reason violates the claim of separability, because it pays attention to the level of well-being of indifferent people. But do we have to pay attention to this reason within *every* plausible egalitarian framework? We do not. By way of illustration, we may defend moderate egalitarianism within the framework of Nagel (1979, 1991), where we seek a result which is acceptable to each person involved. Within such a framework, we can safely ignore the indifferent people, and moreover we may argue that priority among the affected people should be assigned on the basis of *relative positions*. In that case, we have a *separable* strict moderate egalitarian framework.

In such a framework, our concern is to promote equality *within the group of people involved in the conflict.* But that implies that equality promotion demands absolute priority to the worse off in all conflicts where only two persons are involved, which is a condition that has been suggested (in the framework of an all things considered relation) by Hammond (1976, 1979).

The Hammond Equity Condition: If there is a decrease in well-being of a better off person and an increase in well-being of a worse off person (without any reversal of the relative positions) and everyone else is indifferent, then the new alternative is better.

And as shown by Hammond, this is all we need to characterise the leximin principle. Notice that the fact that we aim at promoting equality within the group of people involved in a conflict does not imply that we do not value overall equality.

Within such a framework, we only have to argue that overall equality is of secondary importance. The essential part of this perspective is to aim at acceptability within the group of people involved in the conflict, and we do that better by focusing on equality promotion within this group than on promoting overall equality (if these two aims should ever be in conflict!).

In the philosophical literature, there has been considerable concern about another principle that might be of importance for egalitarians, to wit the weak principle of well-being.

The Weak Principle of Well-Being: If one alternative has more total well-being than another, it is better in one respect.

Of course, the weak principle of well-being is in line with the weak principle of personal good. But it is a much stronger principle that also covers all cases of conflict, and hence is sometimes in direct conflict with the weak principle of equality. Thus we need to clarify how to balance these two principles. In this discussion, we will for the sake of simplicity sometimes refer to the weak principle of well-being as utilitarian reasoning, since this principle is structurally equivalent to the utilitarian perspective.

Before we enter into the problem of balancing, though I believe there is a more fundamental question to ask. If you are an *egalitarian*, then *why* should you care about the weak principle of well-being? If we read Parfit (1995) on this, it becomes clear that he does not make a distinction between the weak principle of personal good and the weak principle of well-being.

> "Suppose next that the people in some community could all be either (1) equally well off, or (2) equally badly off. The [weak] Principle of Equality does not tell us that (2) would be worse. This principle is about the badness of inequality; and, though it would be clearly worse if everyone were equally worse off, our ground for thinking this cannot be egalitarian.
>
> To explain why (2) would be worse, we might appeal to [the weak principle of well-being]...When people would be on average better off, or receive a greater net sum of benefits, we can say, for short, that there would be more [*well-being]*...If we cared only about equality, we would be *Pure* Egalitarians. If we cared only about [well-being], we would be

> Pure Utilitarians - or what is normally called Utilitarians. But most of us accept a *pluralist* view: one that appeals to more than one principle or value" (p. 4).

When comparing (1) and (2) in Parfit's example, it would be sufficient to appeal to the weak principle of personal good. But Parfit defends (1) by appealing to the weak principle of well-being. That is unfortunate, because there is a fundamental difference between these two principles. In my view, egalitarians ought to accept that the weak principle of personal good provides a more fundamental expression of moral equality than the weak principle of equality. But I cannot see that egalitarians in general should accept that the weak principle of well-being expresses moral equality in a way that is on par with expressing moral equality by an equal distribution. Actually, many egalitarians seem to reject utilitarian reasoning altogether, and on this basis they might think that they should reject a pluralistic egalitarian theory as well. This is suggested by McKerlie (1994).[27]

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

However, as I have shown, egalitarians do not have to include utilitarian reasoning in order to have a workable theory. It is sufficient that they accept the weak principle of personal good.

This is not to say that the weak principle of well-being cannot be derived from an idea of moral equality among people. It can, as illustrated by Kymlicka (1988). And it is possible that some egalitarians want to combine these two ways of expressing moral equality in an all things considered evaluation (see for example Nagel, 1979, p. 122).[28] Moreover, other egalitarians may want to include utilitarian reasoning even though they reject it as an expression of moral equality. For these people, the appropriate expression of moral equality is not the only value of importance.

[27]See also McKerlie (1994, footnote 5).

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

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

Usually, the economists have taken the Pigou-Dalton criterion of transfer as the point of departure for a discussion of this framework.[29]

The Pigou-Dalton Principle of Transfer: If there is a transfer of a fixed amount of well-being from a better off person to a worse off person (without any reversal of the relative positions), then the new alternative is better.

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

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

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

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

Temkin's criticism seems to be based on a misunderstanding of the work of economists. The two cases that really worry Temkin are cases where we have a reversal of the relative positions of the two persons affected by the transfer (p. 82) and cases where the total amount of well-being is affected by the transfer (pp. 77-82). But none of these cases are covered by the Pigou-Dalton criterion, as should be clear by the presentation in Dalton (1920, p. 351). This is well-known among economists, even though we often informally present this condition in a rather sloppy manner. A case in point is the above quote from Sen and Foster (1997), which might cause some confusion. Temkin (op.cit., p. 77) and other philosophers use the word transfer somewhat differently from the economist. An economist think of a transfer situation as a case where the total amount of well-being (or income) is the same, whereas philosophers work with both efficient and inefficient transfers that cover cases where the total amount of well-being differ. As a consequence, Temkin interprets the Pigou-Dalton criterion as saying in general that if the well-being of the worse-off increases and the better off decreases then there is equality promotion (see op.cit., pp. 82-83). But that is not the Pigou-Dalton principle, but the Hammond Equity condition introduced earlier.

However, Temkin's analysis adds insight to the controversial aspect of the Pigou-Dalton condition. The problem with the Pigou-Dalton principle is that it only focuses on the narrowing of the gap between the persons involved in the transfer, which implies that it satisfies the claim of separability. No one can reject that such a transfer reduces the inequality between these two. But at the same time it may increase the gap between others in society. Hence, if we care about promoting *overall* equality in the distribution and not only equality between the two persons involved in the conflict, then we may question the condition. Consider the following case, where we evaluate $x = (1, 50, 100)$ and $y = (1, 75, 75)$. Surely, there is complete equality among the two better off in y. But at the same time the transfer has caused an increase in inequality between the worst off and the second worst off. When evaluating overall equality, are we sure that this increase in equality is outweighed by the decrease in equality among the two better off? Of course, one way of defending the Pigou-

Dalton condition is to say that the increase in inequality between the two worse off is actually outweighed by the decrease in inequality between the worst off and the best off. As is easily seen, the reduction in distance between the best off and the worst off is equal to the increase in distance between the worst off and the second worst off. This is no coincidence, it is a generic feature of the kind of transfers captured by the Pigou-Dalton condition. But it is not obvious to me how we should evaluate these two effects when we look at *overall* inequality. It might be the case that our main concern from this perspective is the isolation of the worst off at the bottom of the distribution in y. If so, then we may question the Pigou-Dalton condition. And I don't find such a view entirely implausible, even though my own view is more in line with the perspective of Nagel discussed earlier.

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

Kind of egalitarianism	**Important properties**
Strong Egalitarianism	Violates the general principle of personal good
Strict Moderate Egalitarianism	Discontinuous, absolute priority to equality
Weak Moderate Egalitarianism	Continuous, trade-off between well-being and equality
Quasi-Egalitarian Utilitarianism	Discontinuous, absolute priority to well-being

Table 1 - Egalitarian positions

How do we move from this overall framework of egalitarianism to a conclusion in a particular case if we do not assign absolute priority to equality promotion or utilitarian reasoning? One possibility is to work with a single weak moderate egalitarian position, but the more prominent view within economics has been to look for the possibility of establishing results that are valid for a broad range of moderate

egalitarian positions. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review this literature (see Sen and Foster, 1997). But I should like to end this section by providing some comments on Temkin's (1993) criticism of this approach.[30]

> "The preceding considerations suggest a general and deep problem facing the intersection approach. The problem...is that often an intersection approach will fail to yield an ordering when an ordering should be yielded, and this may be so even in cases where it is quite clear what the correct ordering is...The problem with the intersections is they don't allow trade-offs...It is no doubt true that sometimes when different facets of a multifaceted notion point in different directions a ranking cannot be expected to emerge. But it by no means follows that *whenever* different facets of a multifaceted notion point in different directions a meaningful ranking cannot emerge...Central to the approach I have been advocating is that it will involve precisely the sort of trade-offs precluded by the intersection approach. Thus, before rendering a final judgment as to how two alternatives compare, such an approach will take into account the number and relative significance of the aspects supporting possible judgments as well as the degree to which the different aspects support those judgments" (pp. 144-150).

Again, I believe Temkin's criticism mainly to be based on a misunderstanding of the work of economists. Actually, this possibility is considered by Temkin himself (op.cit., p. 146), but rejected. Still I think that this is the case. Let us illustrate the disagreement in the context of an all things considered evaluation within the framework of weak moderate egalitarianism. The weak principle of equality and the weak principle of well-being often points in different directions. But sometimes they are reconciled, and we usually think that this is in the cases covered by the Pigou-Dalton principle. The intersection approach applied on the weak principle of equality and the weak principle of well-being then tells us that we can make a robust conclusion in these cases. However, Temkin insists that we should move on, and that it by no means follows that whenever these two principles are in conflict a

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

meaningful all things considered evaluation cannot emerge. I totally agree on that. By way of illustration, assume that we want to establish an all things considered evaluation on the basis of the values held by some people in a society. If these people support a more narrow range of appropriate weighting schemes, then we can reach a conclusion in cases not covered by the Pigou-Dalton condition.

But is this in conflict with the idea of the intersection approach? No. "Intersection quasi-orderings are based on *unanimity* according to a given set of criteria" (Sen and Foster, 1997, p. 132). Hence, if we agree on how to make trade-offs between different aspects of a situation, then the intersection approach tells us to extend the incomplete ranking to these cases as well. Thus, the framework advocated by Temkin (1993) is already part of the intersection approach applied by economists, and this framework does not face a general and deep problem. However, it should be applied with care, because sometimes we might include in the analysis positions that do not have (or demand) any support and hence end up with a too incomplete ranking. But that is a different story.[31]

5 Prioritarianism and Sufficiency

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

Roughly speaking, this is the message of prioritarians. And it is an important one. It highlights the fact that there are different *reasons* for caring about the worse off in society. Still, the fact that the absolute circumstances of people affect our evaluations is not news to economists or philosophers, and hence we may wonder why prioritarianism has been considered with so much interest in recent philosophical

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

debate. In order to answer this question, it will be useful to have a brief look at how prioritarianism has been introduced among philosophers. The most prominent contribution on prioritarianism is Parfit (1995), who defines the approach as follows.

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

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

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

Even if you give priority to the worse off, you do not necessarily hold the priority view according to the definition of Parfit. What matters is *why* you give priority, which, of course, should have been reflected in the naming and definition of the position. In my view, a more reasonable labelling would be to make a distinction between relative and absolute prioritarianism. But be that as it may. In order to avoid any confusion, I will refer to the views that pay attention to absolute circumstances as prioritarian and continue to use egalitarianism about the views paying attention to relative circumstances. Moreover, notice that in order to make this principle directly comparable to the weak principle of equality and the weak principle of well-being, we should have reformulated it such that it represents a position on what makes something better in one respect and not as an all things considered relation. However, usually this principle is considered in isolation, and thus we will not bother to do that.

Prioritarianism can be defended in a negative and a positive way.[32] The positive approach is to defend prioritarianism on its own, that is to show that it represents an

[32]When discussing egalitarian reasoning, I made a rough distinction between claims about value that are linked to the moral equality of people and not. And I argued that the only appropriate way of representing the egalitarian reason is to view it as a relevant way of expressing the moral equality of people. This is not the case with prioritarianism. I believe that it makes sense to defend

important point of view when reasoning about distributive principles. The negative approach is to defend it by showing that it represents one way of escaping a number of problems facing standard egalitarian reasoning. Much of the philosophical literature applies the negative approach. By way of illustration, when Parfit (1995, p. 34) summarises his discussion on egalitarianism and prioritarianism, he introduces the priority view as an option that we can move to when we realize the problems facing the egalitarian approach to distributive justice.

What problems do we then avoid when moving from egalitarianism to prioritarianism? First, Parfit (op.cit., p. 22) suggests that it is an advantage that prioritarianism can be considered a complete moral view, in contrast to any plausible version of egalitarianism that ought to be combined with another principle. This fact is also pointed at by McKerlie (1994, p. 27):"some egalitarians regret the fact that the equality view must be combined with another principle. They want a simpler alternative to utilitarianism, and they object to the intuitive nature of the judgments we must make in weighing the reasons provided by the two principles against one another".[33] However, this seems odd to me. Prioritarianism is also intuitionist (Parfit, 1995, p. 20), because it does not tell us how much importance to attach to differences in absolute circumstances, and hence the only difference in this respect (between the two positions) is that in one case we have to rely on intuition when weighing reasons and in the other case when interpreting the single reason constituting our moral position. And I cannot see that this distinction is of any significant importance.

Second, Parfit (op.cit., p. 23) stresses that by endorsing the priority view we avoid the levelling down objection. Certainly, on the basis of a concern for the absolute circumstances of people, there is nothing to be gained by reducing the level

this view without linking it to the moral equality of the agents in question (see also McKerlie (1994) and Parfit (1995)). By way of illustration, our concern for the absolute circumstances of animals might imply that we assign priority to alleviating their sufferings in a conflict with some of our more trivial interests. If so, then this does not reflect any position on the moral equality between people and animals, but simply a particular concern for the alleviation of suffering among all morally relevant agents.

But prioritarianism can be defended as the best expression of moral equality among people, and (among others) Nagel (1979, 1991) has suggested this view.

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

of well-being of the better off. But we have already argued against the levelling down objection, and hence this negative reason should be rejected as well.

Finally, many egalitarians have been reluctant to including utilitarian reasoning in their view on distributive justice. This is not necessary, as illustrated by strict moderate egalitarianism. However, it seems unavoidable if you want to take into account gains and losses in a weaker version of moderate egalitarianism (without including prioritarianism or resorting to an intransitive framework). Many philosophers find this problematic, because they reject assigning value to the total amount of well-being in a situation or value to the expression of moral equality by assigning equal weight to each person's gains and losses, and thus they reject including these reasons in a combined distributive view. In this context, they find the prioritarian reason appealing, because it expresses a different perspective that allows for the inclusion of a concern for gains and losses and at the same time expresses a concern for the worse off. Eventually, gains and losses are included in the prioritarian framework if we do not assign infinitely more importance to improving the *absolute* circumstances of poorer people than better off people.

Is this distinction really relevant? I think so, and I believe that the clarification of this aspect is an interesting contribution of the recent philosophical debate on prioritarianism. Economists have for a long time recognised a formal difference between social welfare functions assigning priority on the basis of relative positions and not; see for example Atkinson and Stiglitz (1980, pp. 340-343). But still I will argue that we have not explored in any detail the basis for this distinction and possible implications of this difference in the mode of justification. Again as an illustration, we could notice that Atkinson and Stiglitz only present prioritarian approach as a formal possibility, without explaining what kind of intuition this framework captures.[34] Our main aim has been to "bring in a built-in bias towards equality" (Sen and Foster, 1997, p. 20) in the all things considered evaluation, and in this work we have tended to think about the prioritarian and egalitarian perspective as two possible representations of a concern for equality. The recent philosophical debate makes clear that there is more to this story. Egalitarianism is about improving the *relative circumstances* of people and hence value equality *directly*, whereas the essence of prioritarianism is to improve the *absolute circumstances* which is only *indirectly*

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

related to a concern about equality.

I assume that the intuition of many economists working with prioritarian social welfare functions has been similar to the one of prioritarian philosophers, but we have been content with the formal presentation. However, as stressed by Rawls (1974, p. 644-645) in his reply to Alexander (1974), there is a need for going beyond the formal framework and work out in more detail the underlying moral outlook. And that is what the prioritarian philosophers have been doing. In other words, the main contribution is not the introduction of a completely new idea (that absolute circumstances should count in distributive reasoning has been suggested by many), but the clarification of how this idea constitutes a distinctive and general perspective on distributive reasoning.[35]

Having said this, I should add that the economists have recognised that some important prioritarian positions cannot be justified on purely egalitarian grounds, even in combination with utilitarian reasoning. The cases I have in mind are those that include an *absolute poverty line* in our distributive judgments. And I think that the possibility of including an absolute poverty line represents one of the most important *positive* reasons for the prioritarian perspective. Most of us recognise the special importance of improving the lives of poor people, and hence should like to include this as a special reason for assigning priority to the worse off in a distributive conflict. The hunger of the hungry, the need of the needy, and the suffering of the ill (Raz,1986, p. 240) provide separate reasons for assigning priority to the worse off that cannot be explained within a framework combining egalitarian and utilitarian reasoning.

It has been argued by some philosophers that an absolute threshold is all there should be to prioritarianism. In particular, Frankfurt (1987, p. 22) suggests *the doctrine of sufficiency*:[36] "If everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others" (p. 21). Hence, according to Frankfurt, we should assign priority to those below this sufficiency threshold in a conflict with

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

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

people who have enough, but there is no reason to assign priority to the worse off among people who have enough.[37]

Such an approach faces at least two challenges. First, it needs to explain what it means that someone has enough.[38] Second, we need to know why we should only assign priority to those below the sufficiency threshold.

> "In the doctrine of sufficiency the use of the notion 'enough' pertains to *meeting a standard* rather than to *reaching a limit*. To say that a person has enough money means that he is content, or that it is reasonable for him to be content, with having no more money than he has. And to say this is, in turn, to say something like the following: the person does not (or cannot reasonably) regard whatever (if anything) is unsatisfying or distressing about his life as due to having too little money. In other words, if a person is (or ought reasonably to be) content with the amount of money he has, then insofar as he is or has a reason to be unhappy with the way his life is going, he does not (or cannot reasonably) suppose that money would - either as a sufficient or as a necessary condition - enable him to become (or have reason to be) significantly less unhappy with it.
>
> It is essential to understand that having enough money differs from

[37]Related views have been expressed by (among others) Anderson (1999) and Hausman (2001). Anderson argues that "democratic equality guarantees not effective access to equal levels of functioning but effective access to levels of functioning, sufficient to stand as an equal in society" (p. 318), and in a similar vein Hausman claims that "[a] concern with equality of moral status supports a limited prioritarianism...not... complete equalizing" (p. 6). Among these writers, there seems to be the view that to appeal to complete equality causes a distraction in moral action and reasoning (see also Rosenberg, 1995), which is most explicitly expressed by Frankfurt (1989). "In this way the doctrine of equality contributes to the moral disorientation and shallowness of our time" (p. 23). There are many possible interpretations of such a claim, but in any case this cannot be launched as an argument against unlimited *prioritarianism!* Equality is not the aim of this approach, and thus the criticism seems often misplaced. Moreover, notice that to say that it is of particular importance to guarantee everyone a certain level of well-being is something different from saying that this is *all* that matters, an issue I return to below.

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

> merely having enough to get along or enough to make life marginally tolerable. People are not generally content with living on the brink. The point of the doctrine of sufficiency is not that the only morally important distributional consideration with respect to money is whether people have enough to avoid economic misery. A person who might naturally and appropriately be said to have just barely enough does not, by the standard invoked in the doctrine of sufficiency, have enough at all" (pp. 37-38).

One problem with this definition is that it is stated in the space of income. But that should not distract us too much. For the sake of simplicity (and nothing else!), let us assume that people are equal in all other respects. Then we can read Frankfurt as saying that there exists a level of well-being that makes us content or ought to make us content, even though we could raise our level of well-being even further by an increase in income. I am not sure how to understand this proposal, but in my view there are two possibilities. One is to argue that there is this feeling of content (or absence of distress) which can be satisfied with a certain amount of money, and which we can argue should be included as a need in an expanded version of the idea of an absolute poverty line. Hunger, illness, social exclusion, and so on cause distress, but this feeling might also be present when the most basic needs are fulfilled. And we might suggest that at a certain level of well-being, this feeling disappear.[39] The other interpretation, relying on Frankfurt's claim that reasonable people ought to feel content at a certain level of well-being, is moral, and is that there is no reason (from your point of view) to object to unequal distributions of well-being as long as you have enough. In other words, that enough defines the level of well-being above which there is no reason to complain.

> "But a reasonable person might well regard an unequal distribution as entirely acceptable even though he did not presume that any other distribution would benefit him less. For he might believe that the unequal distribution provided him with quite enough, and he might reasonably

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

be unequivocally content with that, with no concern for the possibility that some other arrangement would provide him with more" (op.cit, p. 36).

Hence, Frankfurt suggests that if we seek the ideal of acceptability suggested by Nagel, then there is no reason to object to a distribution as long as everyone has enough. Nagel (1991, p. 81) clearly rejects this possibility, and admittedly I find it hard to follow the moral intuition of Frankfurt on this issue. Crisp (2000) suggests an alternative defence, where our priority to the worse off is based on compassion. And Crisp argues as Frankfurt that this only implies priority to people below a certain absolute threshold of sufficiency, because above this threshold compassion actually gives out (p. 19). But is it really so?[40] In my view, a more plausible reading of an absolute threshold is that it represents a level of well-being where there is a fundamental change in moral significance, even though we still care about the distributive problem among people above this level. Of course, it is not easy to draw any such line, and in that respect it is important to notice the work of economists on fuzzy poverty lines.[41] But I believe that most people share the intuition that there is a fundamental difference in the complaints of a person living in destitution and the complaints of a person living a good life. We may say that this illustrates a case where the better off person has a enough (in order to fulfill all important needs), and hence where we assign absolute priority to the poor person (without rejecting the relevance of the claim of the better off person). Or in the language of Crisp, we may argue that our compassion for the poor person is given absolute priority, without rejecting that we assign compassion to the improvements in the life of the better off person as well.

[40] When discussing the sufficiency doctrine of Anderson (1999), Arneson (2000) explicitly rejects such a view on distributive justice.

"Democratic equality holds that once someone is above the basic capability threshold, justice is unconcerned with whether or not his life goes better or worse. Why not? Suppose that society faces an issue, say a choice of tax policy, where the interests of those who are far above the basic capability threshold...are starkly opposed to the interests of those who are just above the threshold...Unfortunately someone's ox must be gored. Whose? Responsibility-catering prioritarianism says that on the facts as described, other things equal we should favor the worse off in order to fulfill the requirements of justice. Democratic equality says that the issue is a "don't care" from the standpoint of justice. I disagree" (p. 347).

[41] Again, see Sen and Foster (1997, p. 188-191) for an overview.

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

> "One might of course agree that the world is a pretty terrible place without subscribing to [a prioritarianism] as general as I have proposed. One might say that all the moral intuition of which we can be confident would be fully accounted for by a principle of priority to those who are not only worse off than others, but absolutely deprived, because their basic needs for food, shelter, health, and minimal self-respect are not met. This is certainly a possible view...However, I want to defend the stronger priority of worse over better off, for two reasons. First, it seems intuitively right...I do not think that our sense of priority for improvements in the position of those lower down on the scale is exhausted by the case of the absolutely needy...My second reason...is that it is supported by the best theoretical interpretation of impartiality, in terms of individualized concern. The resulting method of pairwise comparison with priority going to the lower member of the pair simply does not cease to apply above the level of basic needs" (pp. 69-70).

On the basis of the discussion so far, we may sketch (very roughly) the following general structure of prioritarianism.

Kind of prioritarianism	**Important properties**
Strict Prioritarianism	The leximin principle
Restricted Moderate Prioritarianism	Priority, trade-off restricted by threshold
Unrestricted Moderate Prioritarianism	Priority, trade-off in general
Quasi-Prioritarian Utilitarianism	Equal to quasi-egalitarian utilitarianism

Table 2 - Prioritarian positions

All these prioritarian rules satisfy the Pigou-Dalton principle, which is unquestionable within this framework. This is due to the fact that any prioritarian rule must be *separable*. The level of well-being of indifferent people is of no importance when we assign priority on the basis of the absolute circumstances of people, and the separability part was the controversial issue when we discussed the Pigou-Dalton principle in the context of equality promotion. However, the prioritarian rules differ in two respects, and that is in the importance they attach to the absolute threshold and in the extent of the priority they assign to the worse off in general.

How does this structure compare to the egalitarian framework presented in Table 1? First, we should notice that there is no prioritarian position equivalent to strong egalitarianism, which is due to the fact that all prioritarian rules satisfy the general principle of personal good. Second, strict prioritarianism, i.e. absolute priority to improving the absolute circumstances of the worse off, is by definition the leximin principle, whereas it is somewhat more controversial to claim that strict egalitarianism, i.e. absolute priority to equality promotion, can be captured by this principle (though I have suggested that we should think so). Finally, prioritarianism includes two intermediate classes, which reflects the presence of an absolute threshold in prioritarian reasoning.

It is clear that if we want to include an absolute threshold in our reasoning, then we have to rely on prioritarian reasoning. But are there other cases where it matters whether we apply the egalitarian or the prioritarian framework? There are two ways of approaching this question. One is to look for cases where it is *implausible* that (some rule) within both positions support the same conclusion; the other is to look for cases where it is *impossible* that (some rule) within both positions support the same conclusion. Economists have been eager to look for the impossible cases (Broome, 2001, Fleurbaey, 2001); philosophers have been more concerned with the implausible cases (McKerlie, 1994, Parfit, 1995).

Let us first look at the impossible cases. As far as I can see, the only cases where it will be impossible to attain the same conclusion on the basis of both perspectives are cases where the all things considered evaluation is *non-separable.* By way of illustration, compare $x = (1, 4, 4)$, $y = (1, 3, 6)$, $z = (4, 4, 10)$, and $w = (3, 6, 10)$. In this case, it is possible to find a weak moderate egalitarian position saying that x is better than y and w is better than z. But no prioritarian rule can support this conclusion, because in order to do that we need to assign importance to the

well-being level of indifferent people in our evaluation. And that cannot be justified within a prioritarian framework. However, the converse conclusion cannot be drawn, as we elaborated on in section 4, because a separable all things considered evaluation can also be based on a moderate egalitarian rule.

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

> "If we are not concerned with relative levels, why should the smallest benefit to the ...worst-off person count for infinitely more than much greater benefits to other representative people?" (Parfit, 1995, p. 39).
>
> "If the difference principle is a version of the priority view, it is more vulnerable to the intuitive objection. The objection seems to show that, although we might give greater priority to helping the very worst-off, we do not give it absolute priority. We think that a small gain for them can be morally outweighed by a much larger gain for others who are also badly-off" (McKerlie, 1994, p. 33).

It is clear that within the egalitarian framework, we can derive the leximin principle from a set of first principles and thereby avoid intuitionism (Rawls, 1971, p. 34), whereas a prioritarian defence of the leximin principle has to be based on intuitive reasoning. That is an important difference, of course, and it might be the case that our intuitions undermine the prioritarian justification of the leximin principle.

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

Economists prefer the intersection approach, and the Pigou-Dalton condition represents the basis for an intersection approach that includes both the moderate

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

6 Non-aggregative Reasoning

So far we have suggested that the leximin principle can be defended on the basis of equality promotion or as an intuition about the extent of priority to assign to the worse off within prioritarianism. In this section, I will look at a third way of defending this principle, by taking as the point of departure that we want to avoid aggregative reasoning. I find the non-aggregative perspective particularly interesting, because it highlights the fact that aggregation is an issue that should be treated independently of the question about how much priority to assign to the worse off. It is easy to overlook this fact, and therefore reject non-aggregation on the wrong premises. The non-aggregative claim is that the numbers should not count (Taurek, 1978), and *not* that we should assign absolute priority to the worse off. Maybe some readers find non-aggregation equally implausible as assigning absolute priority to the worse off. But as we will see, there are interesting arguments supporting a non-aggregative approach, and thus we should not reject this perspective out of hand. Hence, in this section I will look at both the grounds of justification and implications of the non-aggregative perspective.

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

> "My way of thinking about these trade-off situations consists, essentially, in seriously considering what will be lost or suffered by this one person if I do not prevent it, and in comparing the significance of that *for him* with what would be lost or suffered by anyone else if I do not

prevent it. This reflects a refusal to take seriously in these situation any notion of the sum of two persons' separate losses...The discomfort of each of a large number of individuals experiencing a minor headache does not add up to anyone's experiencing a migraine. In such a trade-off situation as this we are to compare your pain or your loss, not to our collective or total pain, whatever exactly that is supposed to be, but to what would be suffered or lost by *any given single of us"* (pp. 307-308).

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

"The main point about a measure of urgency is that it is done by pairwise comparison of the situations of individuals. The simplest method would be to count *any* improvement in the situation of someone worse off as more urgent than any improvement in the situation of someone better off; but this is not especially plausible. It is more reasonable to accord greater urgency to larger improvements somewhat higher in the scale than to very small improvements lower down. Such a modified principle could still be described as selecting the alternative that was least unacceptable from each point of view. This method can be extended to problems of social choice involving large numbers of people. So long as numbers do not count it remains a type of unanimity criterion, defined by a suitable measure of urgency" (p. 125).[42]

This view is also closely related to the kind of contractualism defended by Scanlon (1982, 1998).[43] Scanlon (1998) looks for principles that no one, if suitably motivated, could reasonably reject, and where "the justifiability of a moral principle

[42]See also Nagel (1970, pp. 140-142) and Nagel (1979). Nagel acknowledges that it is hard to see that the numbers should not count *at all* when reasoning on distributive conflicts, but he claims that if we accept some kind of aggregation procedure then we cannot endorse this by any appeal to unanimity ((1979, p. 125) and (1991, p. 73)). See Brink (1993, p. 280) for a rejection of the link between reasonable unanimity and pairwise-comparisons.

[43]But with important differences. First, Scanlon is in general sceptical to the welfaristic framework; second Scanlon provides an alternative justification of the need for unanimity; and third the focus of Scanlon is more on personal morality than the ethics of distribution in general (see also

depends only on various *individuals'* reasons for objecting to that principle and alternatives to it. This feature is central to the guiding idea of contractualism, and is also what enables it to provide a clear alternative to utilitarianism and other forms of consequentialism...utilitarianism, and most other forms of consequentialism, have highly implausible implications, which flow directly from the fact that their mode of justification is, at base, an aggregative one..."(pp. 229-230). However, also Scanlon rejects that the only individual reason of relevance should be the *level* of well-being a person attains in different alternatives.

> "Under contractualism, when we consider a principle our attention is naturally directed first to those who would do worst under it. This is because if anyone has reasonable grounds for objecting to the principle it is *likely* to be them. It does not follow, however, that contractualism always requires us to select the principle under which the expectations of the worse off are highest. The reasonableness of the Losers' objection to A is not established simply by the fact that they are worse off under A and no-one would be this badly off under E. The force of their complaint depends also on the fact that their position under A is, in absolute terms, very bad, and would be significantly better under E. This complaint must be weighed against those of individuals who would do worse under E. The question to be asked is, is it unreasonable for someone to refuse to put up with the Loser's situation under A in order that someone else should be able to enjoy the benefits which he would have to give up under E? As the supposed situation of the Loser under A becomes better, or his gain under E smaller in relation to sacrifices required to produce it, his case is weakened" (Scanlon (1982, p. 123)).

Hence, roughly speaking, we may say that the general perspective of Nagel and Scanlon consists of two main arguments. First, that the non-aggregative approach is the most legitimate distributive perspective, because it comes closest to our demand for unanimity among reasonable people. It supports the alternative that is least unacceptable to the person to whom it is most unacceptable. Second, that a measure

Nagel, 1999). Moreover, the contractarian perspective of Scanlon (1982) differs somewhat from the view in Scanlon (1998); see Reibetanz (1998). I will not make any attempt to see how our discussion relates to the particularities of each of these different non-aggregative positions.

of individual acceptability should take into account both the level of well-being and the gains or losses for a person.

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

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

Non-Aggregation: For any two alternatives x and y, if there exists a person j such that x is more unacceptable to j then y is to any other person, then y is better than x.[44]

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

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

Notice that the egalitarian interpretation of the Pigou-Dalton principle of unacceptability is not that it covers cases where equality in the overall distribution is promoted. It is only that equality would be promoted between the two persons involved in the pairwise comparison of acceptability.[45]

However, within this framework, there is no other option than the leximin principle.

Observation: The leximin principle is the only transitive rule that satisfies Non-Aggregation and the Pigou-Dalton principle of Unacceptability.

We have not stated this observation formally, and thus we will only provide an informal discussion of the structure of the proof. Assume that the observation

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

[45]This is related to our discussion in Section 4 about how to defend separability within an egalitarian framework, but with two important differences. In that case, we focussed on equality promotion in general (and not only in the set of cases covered by the Pigou-Dalton principle), and more importantly we defended an aggregative view that involved equality promotion within the group of people involved in the conflict.

is wrong. In that case, there should exist two alternatives x and y such that x is considered better than y by a rule satisfying the conditions of the observation and at the same time the worst off i (who is not indifferent) is better off in y than x. I will take as a point of departure a two person society, but the modification of the proof for the many person case is trivial. Hence, let us say that $x = (10, 100)$ and $y = (25, 50)$. Now consider two other alternatives, z and w, which are equal to x and y, respectively, except for the fact that there is a number of new people in z and w. We assume three things about these new people. First, they are indifferent about z and w. Second, they have a well-being level which is in between the well-being levels of i and the best off in y. Third, the number of new people can be chosen freely. In our example, let $z = (10, 100, 40, 40, 40, 40)$ and $w = (25, 50, 40, 40, 40, 40)$. According to the Pigou-Dalton principle of acceptability, the new people cannot influence our evaluation, because they find both alternatives equally acceptable. Hence, the rule must consider z better than w. Let z be the status quo and redistribute, where each step is a two person conflict between the best off and one of the new persons in z, until all of them and the best off losses less than the worst off by a move to w. As an illustration, the first step in our example could be to move from z to the distribution $(10, 90, 50, 40, 40, 40)$. Each such step is endorsed by the Pigou-Dalton principle of unacceptability, and hence the new alternative, in our case $z^* = (10, 60, 50, 50, 50, 50)$, must be better than w from transitivity. However, according to the same principle, w is better than z^*, which shows that the supposition in the first part of this paragraph is not possible.

Hence, if we accept transitivity, then the leximin principle is the only non-aggregative option that can express a concern for the worse off. Thus, it is not possible to capture the general suggestion of Scanlon and Nagel within a coherent framework. As in the case of equality promotion discussed in section 4, there are several ways of responding to this result (beyond rejecting transitivity).[46] So the result should be interpreted with care. But in my view it provides a very interesting defence of the leximin principle, namely that this is the *only coherent non-aggregative*

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

rule that always assigns priority to the worse off.

Our result points at another very important issue, which often is forgotten, and that is that *any* aggregative approach sometimes accepts that the interests of the worse off is outweighed by the interests of better off even though each of the better off gains less than the worse off. Actually, we could have stated an even stronger observation (which should be easily seen from the proof), and that is that *any* aggregative framework accepts that the interests of the worse off is outweighed by the interests of the better off even though the gain of each of the better off is infinitesimal. We may name this the tyranny of aggregation (see also Crisp (2000) and Temkin (2000b)).

Of course, the tyranny of aggregation is well-known in the context of utilitarianism. But it is important to notice that the same argument can be launched against *any* other transitive aggregation rule (independent of how much priority these rules assign to the worse off). Of course, more people need to gain if the aggregative rule assigns a strong priority to the worse off, but that is of secondary importance for our argument. The general problem is that these rules allow the loss of a worse off to be outweighed by a minimal gain of some number of better off people. And that is highly questionable, as illustrated in a nice example by Scanlon (1998).[47]

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

Does this mean that we should adopt the leximin principle? Maybe, but we should have in mind the well-known tyranny of non-aggregation as well.[48]

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

[48]In some cases, it seems obvious that the numbers should count, for example when we choose

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

Of course, the tyranny of non-aggregation could be stated much stronger, by noticing that the leximin principle would demand that any minor improvement in the hardship of the worst off should outweigh any loss of well-being of any other

between saving three of five persons. Within our framework, these cases are covered by the leximin principle. But since this particular case has caused some worry among the defenders of the non-aggregative approach (see for example Reibetanz (1998)), I should like to elaborate somewhat on this problem in a more general setting. Scanlon (1998) expresses his worry as follows:

> "The problem is, however, that contractualism appears to go too far in the opposite direction, disallowing any appeal to aggregative benefits even in cases in which the right thing to do does seem to depend not only on the impact that various actions would have on particular individuals but also on the number of individuals who would be so affected. For example, in a situation in which we must choose between saving two different groups of people from the same loss or injury, it seems that it would be wrong, absent some special justification, simply to choose the course of action that leads to more people's being killed or injured. This appears to pose a problem for contractualism, since, assuming that the losses or injuries to all the parties are the same and their grounds for rejecting a principle depend solely on these losses, the generic reasons for rejecting a principle permitting us to save the smaller number will, it seems, be evenly balanced by the generic individual reasons for rejecting a principle requiring one to save the greater number. It therefore seems that as long as it confines itself to reasons for rejecting arising from individual standpoints contractualism will be unable to explain how the number of people affected by an action can ever make a moral difference" (p. 230).

However, if we apply transitivity, then this does not seem too hard to explain. Let x be the case where we save five persons x_1, x_2, $..,x_5$, x^* the case where we only save x_1, x_2, x_3, and y the case where we save three other persons y_1, y_2, y_3. It follows straightforwardly from this framework that we should save more people if it is the same group of people involved in both cases, that is x should be preferred to x^*. Moreover, we should be indifferent between x^* and y, and hence it follows from transitivity that x should be preferred to y. In other words, if we accept transitivity (as for example Reibetanz (1998, p. 311), then we can defend the relevance of numbers in certain cases on the basis of individual reasons. See also Sanders (1988), Kamm (1993) and Reibetanz (1998, footnote 12).

number of people living in destitution. And that is as questionable as the tyranny of aggregation.

Is it possible to adopt some intermediate position? The quotes from Nagel and Scanlon may suggest so. Scanlon illustrates the tyranny of aggregation by looking at a case where (in our context) we may think of the people who gain as well-off and the one who is loosing as badly-off in an absolute sense.[49] On the other hand, Nagel illustrates the tyranny of non-aggregation by looking at an example where all the people involved live in destitution. And I don't think that this is a coincidence, because our strongest intuitions about the tyranny of aggregation is when a minor gain of a large number of people living above an absolute threshold outweighs the losses of a person living below this threshold. And similarly, the tyranny of non-aggregation is most plausible when we look at people who have roughly speaking the same living conditions.

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

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

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

[49] Of course, this does not imply anything about the general level of well-being of these people, but only about their level of well-being within the distributive unit of the problem. Moreover, notice that this is not the framework of Scanlon, who rejects to narrow these cases to the welfaristic framework. Anyhow, I believe that the example captures the intuition I should like to illustrate. See Norcross (1997) for a general defence of the tyranny of aggregation.

7 Reason and Representation

Much of the present discussion has taken place within a framework that might be contested, and hence in this section I should like to elaborate somewhat on two of the basic features of my approach. First, I have applied the transitivity assumption (on the all things considered relation) extensively; second, I have implicitly assumed that the badness of inequality is an *input* to an *egalitarian* evaluation of the overall goodness of distributions. However, both these assumptions have been questionened. It has been argued that our values sometimes imply a violation of transitivity (Temkin, 1987, 1996, 1999), and moreover that the badness of inequality might better be understood as a *derivative* of a *distributive sensitive* all things considered relation (Dalton (1920), Atkinson (1970), Ebert (1987), Sen og Foster (1997)). Let us consider these claims in some more detail, in order to see how they affect the present discussion.

Most people consider transitivity a fundamental part of practical reasoning. But Temkin has argued that there are moral cases which cast doubt on this view. Of particular relevance for our discussion is the argument in Temkin (1987), where egalitarian reasoning enters the stage in a discussion of the mere addition paradox of Parfit (1984).[50] The paradox combines intuitions about the value of additional lives and the value of equality. Parfit thinks that the paradox illustrates that a particular set of intuitions is irrational, whereas Temkin argues that the lesson should be that we ought to give up any a priori assumption about transitivity. The argument consists of two steps. First, Temkin claims that egalitarian reasoning produces an intransitive relation among the alternatives considered in the paradox. Second, he argues that this intransitivity will be carried over into the all things considered relation.

> "We have seen that inequality is deeply intransitive...Inequality isn't all we care about, nor even, perhaps, what we most care about; but, for many, it is *one* important element of our judgments of preferability. Thus, how situations compare regarding inequality may determine how they compare regarding preferability if 'other things are equal,' or at

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

least 'equal enough.' But then, if inequality is deeply intransitive, it seems likely there are bound to be *some* situations which are equivalent, or nearly equivalent, in terms of the other ideals we care about such that the deep intransitivity of inequality will be carried over into our judgments of preferability...*If an important aspect of a complex notion is deeply intransitive, the notion itself will be deeply intransitive*" (Temkin, 1987, p. 153).

The second step of Temkin's argument looks ingenuous, but the existence part of his claim is in my view far from trivial. However, I will not dwell on this part, but in the present context rather look at Temkin's claim about egalitarian reasoning. Is it really the case that egalitarian reasoning contributes to produce intransitivity among the distributions in the paradox?

As an illustration of the structure of the mere addition paradox, consider $x = (5)$, $y = (4, 4, 4)$, and $z = (5, 2, 2)$, where each position refers to the well-being of a particular individual. Hence, person two and three in y and z are non-existent in x. The egalitarian perspective discussed by Temkin (1987, p. 147 and Parfit (1984)) says that with respect to the badness of inequality, x is equal to y, y is better than z, and z is not worse than x, which points in the direction of an intransitive relation.[51] Obviously, the controversial part of this perspective is the claim that when comparing x and z, the inequality in z does not matter. How can that be defended? The argument of Temkin is as follows.

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

Is it so? Before we answer the question, let me elaborate somewhat on the intuition of Temkin and Parfit. They do not reject that the inequality in z is a bad feature of this distribution. What they reject is that this bad feature constitutes an argument in favour of x when compared with z. This is a highly controversial distinction, though, and we may find it more appropriate to accept that z is worse

[51]However, it does not imply acyclicality, and hence it might still be possible to find maximal alternatives in this situation. I will not elaborate on alternative consistency requirements and the distinction between choice and evaluation; see Sen (1970, 1986, 1995).

with respect to inequality but still not worse all things considered. According to Temkin (1987, footnote 7, p. 142), however, such a view faces another problem, namely that it must imply that we assign intrinsic moral value to additional lives (which is a claim rejected by both Temkin and Parfit). Otherwise, how can we say that z is not worse all things considered? If it is worse in one dimension and not better in any, it seems like we have to accept that the mere addition of lives makes the world worse. But that is also a claim rejected by Temkin and Parfit. Hence, we have reached an impasse, and the only option seems to be to accept the intransitivity of the egalitarian perspective. Is that really the case? As I see it, an alternative and more promising approach is to acknowledge that certain features of the alternatives (that some people exist in one alternative and not in the other) make them incomparable, even though we can rank the alternatives along certain dimensions.[52] In other words, to outweigh the badness of inequality in z compared to x, we need not identify a respect in which z is better than x. It is sufficient to recognize the respects which make them incomparable. And by adopting such a perspective, we avoid intransitivity in the egalitarian perspective.

Of course, this does not prove that Temkin's general claim is wrong. There might be other cases to consider, and Temkin (1996) provides a discussion of some of them. I will not elaborate on these cases, but rather turn to a discussion about the possible meaning of an intransitive all things considered relation and how eventually to defend transitivity. Some people find intransitivity meaningless, at least in a certain context (Broome, 1991). They argue that the transitivity of a betterness relation is a truth of logic, though they accept that there might be other (possibly intransitive) all things considered relations. Temkin (1997) is not supportive of this line of reasoning.

> "[A] conceptual defence of the axiom of transitivity is, I think, a hollow victory. Such a defence succeeds only by robbing the axiom of its force. If there is no way the axiom could fail to be true - by definition or as a matter of 'logic' - then I fear it lacks substance. A linguistic truth

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

that is unfalsifiable is trivial, and not a useful substantive principle for guiding and assessing actions or beliefs" (p. 33).

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

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

Of course, it is possible to argue that logic provides such a reason. But that does not seem to be what Kolm and Temkin have in mind. They want a substantive defence of the transitivity condition. An outline of such a defence is presented by Hurley (1989).

> "To do what one think is best, all things considered, is to act in accord with a view of the relationships among the relevant reasons for action that promises to provide an orderly and consistent method of proceeding when they conflict. But having the kind of reason such a theory provides doesn't make the reasons the theory is about any less reasons for action...Although one should, all things considered, act in accord with the theory, nevertheless the reasons the theory is about may still conflict with the reasons the theory provides. Reasons for action are *pro tanto*, not *prima facie*; they aren't bits of evidence about what should be done that yield to better more comprehensive evidence.
>
> Suppose a sceptic about the authority of theory...asks: Why should I act in accord with the theory rather than one of the conflicting reasons it's about? Does he suppose that an answer to this question might be provided by yet another, higher-order reason, that will eliminate the conflict? One should, all things considered, act in accord with the theory

> rather than in accord with one of the conflicting values the theory is about: but the sense in which you should is just given the supposition that it *is* the *best account* [my emphasis] of the relationships among the values" (pp. 260-261).

This suggests a substantive defence of transitivity, because it does not rule out the possibility that there might be better ways of proceeding when values are in conflict. And even though there is a need for elaborating on the framework (which it is beyond the scope of this paper to do), I find it appealing. In particular, I find two features attractive. First, the reason-giving force of transitivity is not defended by appealing to any reason-giving force of the concept of betterness (which would violate the account of value outlined in section 2), and moreover the reason-giving force of the conflicting values is retained within the theory. In any case, as the reader will see, there is a close relationship between my discussion of the reported results in previous sections and the framework of Hurley. Hence, I believe that the use of transitivity can be defended in the present context, though it should be handled with care.

Let us now turn to the second basic feature of my framework. I have appealed to the badness of inequality as an *input* to *egalitarian* considerations about the goodness of different distributions. But there is a long tradition in economics arguing that the badness of inequality can be interpreted more broadly, as a derivative of any distributive sensitive all things considered relation. On the basis of this view, Fleurbaey (2001) has argued that the distinction between egalitarianism and prioritarianism vanishes. The idea is straightforward. On the basis of any prioritarian rule, we can derive an inequality measure (satisfying the Pigou-Dalton condition) such that the prioritarian rule can be considered the outcome of a process where we weigh inequality and the average level of well-being. Hence, Fleurbaey suggests, a prioritarian will always find an egalitarian on her side.

> "In short, a prioritarian will always find an egalitarian who advocates the same social ranking. When comparing distributions with the same total amount of benefits, the prioritarian will agree with any egalitarian who measures inequality with the same index that is implicit in the prioritarian's social ranking" (pp. 8-9).

The problem is, however, that there will be no egalitarian supporting the prioritarian *inequality index*, because this index is derived from prioritarian reasoning. That means that it captures the idea of priority on the basis of absolute positions, and *not* the egalitarian concern for relative positions. Hence, this change in representation of prioritarianism does not make it equivalent to egalitarianism.[53]

A related argument has been suggested by (?, 2000), who claims that the fact that we can represent prioritarianism in this way shows that the levelling down objection cannot be used to make a distinction between egalitarianism and prioritarianism.[54] If we view prioritarianism as the outcome of a process where we weigh the badness of inequality and the average level of well-being in society, then (?, 2000) argues that it becomes clear that the levelling down objection applies to prioritarianism as well. An arbitrary choice of representation cannot matter (op.cit., p. 15). We have already rejected the levelling down objection, but still this argument is of some interest. In my view, it illustrates a fundamental mistake easily done by economists when approaching the philosophical issues involved in this debate. The philosophers are concerned with the different sets of *reasons* that can be used to justify redistribution (see also Fleurbaey (2001, p. 1)), and this aim should be kept in mind when introducing formal reasoning.[55] In particular, any particular formal representation in this context represents a particular set of reasons, and thus the choice of representation is not at all arbitrary. Prioritarians do not appeal to equality directly whereas egalitarians do, and this distinction needs to be captured in an appropriate representation of these positions. At least, if we want to discuss the same set of issues as the philosophers.

8 Concluding Remarks

Isaiah Berlin once remarked that "[s]ome among the Great Goods cannot live together. That is a conceptual truth. We are doomed to choose, and every choice may

[53]Which is not to say that there are no cases where the egalitarian and prioritarian perspective coincide on the overall conclusion or on the ranking of inequality. There are cases of agreement (as discussed earlier), but still the perspectives will differ on how they defend any common conclusion.

[54]The argument in (?, 2000) is more elaborate, but I focus here on the part relevant for the present discussion.

[55]By way of illustration, see Arneson (2000, p. 343), where he discusses *the appropriateness of the attitude of prioritarianism* as expressed by the *reasons that warrants its adoption.*

entail an irreparable loss" (Berlin, 1991, p. 13). In distributive justice, this truism is easily seen, and it highlights the need for a careful examination of the various reasons that may guide us in these hard choices. Economists and philosophers often approach this task in different ways. Economists have mainly been concerned with how different reasons fit together, whereas the philosophers to much greater extent have explored the basis for the various reasons in question. This division of work implies that there is much to learn from each other, if we manage to find a common framework for discussion.

That is not easy, and I have to admit that I ran into many pitfalls when writing this paper. The fact that the philosophers often approach the problem at a different level of analysis makes many of the arguments hard to understand for an economist (and I assume that the philosophers sometimes feel the same about the work of economists). Nevertheless, there is a lot to learn from the philosophical literature on egalitarianism, and in this paper I have made an attempt to survey some of the main lessons and how they fit the economist's way of thinking on these issues. Let me briefly summarize. The most important issue in distributive justice is *how much* priority to assign to the worse off, and the philosophical literature adds insight to this issue by making a clear distinction between egalitarianism and prioritarianism. It turns out that the strength of your distributive preferences may depend on whether you appeal to egalitarianism or prioritarianism. Egalitarians assign priority to the worse off on the basis of relative positions, and this provides a strong case for absolute priority to the worse off. By combining the philosophical argument with economic reasoning, I showed that there is an extremely close link between equality promotion and Rawlsian reasoning. The link to Rawlsian reasoning is not equally strong within prioritarianism, but this framework allows for the inclusion of an absolute poverty line in our distributive judgments. And such a poverty line is essential for most people when discussing the extent of priority to assign to the worse off.

Moreover, the philosophical literature adds a lot of insight into how to defend *the separability condition* frequently used by economists. This condition is in fact of much practical importance, because if adopted it makes possible a decomposable approach to policy considerations. Foster and Sen (1997) discuss this issue at some length, but remarks that "even if one accept the *usefulness* of decomposability, one might still wonder about its *acceptability* as a general condition" (p. 156). Within the framework of an all things considered evaluation, prioritarianism provides one

way of justifying decomposability. However, as discussed in section 4, this condition can also be justified within an egalitarian framework, if we adopt unanimity as the basis for our egalitarian concern.

I also believe that the philosophical literature on *non-aggregative reasoning* provides an extremely important reminder to economists, who easily forget that the aggregative approach needs to be defended. However, as shown in section 6, the main implication of the non-aggregative approach is that it provides another interesting defence of the leximin principle. Finally, even though I am not convinced by the arguments against the Pareto principle (or the general principle of personal good) and transitivity, I have learned a lot from reading the critical literature on these topics. Again, the literature makes clear that there is a need for an explicit defence of these conditions, and to better understand the appropriate nature of this defence is of course of much importance in itself.

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