Equality-Tempered Prioritarianism

Dale Dorsey

Department of Philosophy
University of Alberta
4-115 Humanities Centre
Edmonton, Alberta
Canada T6G 2E5
dorsey@ualberta.ca

According to prioritarianism, the only thing that improves a state of affairs is improvements in well-being. In this, prioritarianism agrees with many traditional axiologies, including classical utilitarianism. Distinctive about prioritarianism, however, is its weighting. Simply put, all welfare benefits improve a state of affairs, but benefits to worse-off persons improve states of affairs more. All identical welfare benefits are worth more if given to a person who is less well-off. Despite its weighting, prioritarianism is an underspecified axiology. Any view between the extremes of utilitarianism, on the one hand, and leximin, on the other, is properly described as prioritarian.¹ In contrast to utilitarianism, prioritarianism holds that not all benefits equal size are equally valuable. In contrast to leximin, prioritarianism holds that benefits to the worse-off do not maintain absolute priority. As Nils Holtug writes, “prioritarianism is an aggregative (indeed additive) principle . . . for any finite sum of benefits that fall at a lower level, it can be outweighed by a sufficiently large sum of benefits that fall at a—indeed any—higher level. In this respect, it differs from a principle that would give absolute priority to the very worst off.”² Prioritarianism thus encompasses a wide range of axiological principles, depending on the specified weighting.

One way to capture the prioritarian idea is by way of a piece of terminology. Call a “welfare unit” a welfare benefit of arbitrary size. For prioritarianism, the overall contribution of one welfare unit decreases as the welfare of the beneficiary of that unit increases, as shown in Figure 1.

---

¹Richard Arneson makes this point in “Perfectionism and Politics” in Ethics 110 (2000).
On standard assumptions, the prioritarian value curve is horizontally asymptotic; the value of welfare units will diminish to zero as the welfare levels of potential beneficiaries increases.

Despite its vague specification, prioritarianism appears to successfully capture a number of intuitions that drive people away from utilitarianism and toward a form of egalitarianism. One reason egalitarianism seems so attractive is the fact that equality is generally increased by improving the position of the worse-off relative to the better-off. As we tend toward equality—generally speaking—we improve the welfare of the worst-off. However, egalitarianism appears to deliver this verdict in an indirect, roundabout way. Prioritarianism, on the other hand, delivers the goods—a greater concern for the welfare of the worse-off—directly.

1. Misery for the Ultra-Rich

But there is trouble in paradise. Consider the following proposition:

*Misery for the Ultra-Rich:* There is some number of minor welfare benefits that could be granted to the Ultra-Rich such that these benefits would outweigh the disvalue of a life of absolute misery for one person.

*Misery for the Ultra-Rich* is strongly unintuitive, and causes problems for views that imply it. For starters, utilitarianism is clearly subject to *Misery*
for the Ultra-Rich. If all welfare units are equivalent in value, there is certainly some number of minor benefits for the better-off that will outweigh a major welfare burden for a worse-off person. In saying so, utilitarianism stands in need of revision. But prioritarianism does little better. Though prioritarianism seems to correct an intuitive deficiency of utilitarianism by attaching greater weight to the welfare of the worst-off, prioritarianism also delivers Misery for the Ultra-Rich. Though misery for a single person is, in some sense, worse under a prioritarian axiological regime than under utilitarianism, this fact is not enough to rule out the suggestion that there is some amount of benefit for the Ultra-Rich that could outweigh misery for a single individual.

Thus in endorsing Misery for the Ultra-Rich, prioritarianism appears to have a significant problem. But partisans have a perfectly plausible response, one that deserves consideration here. Misery for the Ultra-Rich is difficult to overcome for any axiological theory that is not substantially implausible in other regards. The crucial problem seems to be the plausibility of continuity as an axiological principle: it seems right to say that a welfare benefit—any size—of type $x$ (where “types” are differentiated by the place of the beneficiary in the overall distribution) can always be outweighed by enough of any other welfare type $y$.

Some views have denied continuity. One important example is leximin. This view holds that benefits for the worse-off are absolutely prior in value to benefits to the better-off. Leximin solves Misery for the Ultra-Rich. Because benefits to the worse-off are absolutely prior in value, it is not the case that there is some finite number of benefits to the best-off that would trade-off against burdens for the worse-off. But leximin has been rightly criticized as too extreme. Consider the possibility that in order to benefit one member of the worst-off class, who is doing very poorly, all members of the next worse-off class, who are doing quite badly themselves, must sacrifice nearly all of the benefits they achieve that make their lives even barely worth living. Insofar as leximin implies that such a distribution would be better, leximin delivers unacceptably strong results, and should be rejected.

Further, one could accept a form of sufficientarianism, which would set some particularly important line of welfare achievement, and declare that benefits below the line are to take absolute priority to benefits above the

\footnote{Continuity also requires aggregation to imply Misery for the Ultra-Rich. I will leave aside the appeal of aggregation here.}

This view would posit a non-leximin denial of continuity. It would not be the case that benefits to all worse-off persons would take absolute priority to benefits to all better-off persons. Rather, it would be the case that worse-off persons below a certain threshold would take absolute priority to better-off persons above that threshold. Leaving aside the persistent worry about the plausibility of embracing one particular line of welfare achievement as supreme from the point of view of evaluation, this proposal delivers implausible axiological verdicts. Imagine, for instance, that some person is living a good life above the line, but could be lowered to just above the line (barely achieving whatever line of important significance is identified by this form of sufficientarianism) for the benefit of miniscule welfare gains for some finite amount of Mega-Rich persons (Mega > Ultra). In other words, we simply shift the persons involved in the original Misery for the Ultra-Rich case higher on the scale. I submit that this is no more plausible than the original Misery for the Ultra-Rich, especially given that sufficientarianism is most plausible when the threshold is set at a relatively low level.

Alternatively, one could adopt strong egalitarianism. Strong egalitarianism rank-orders states of affairs based only on the extent of the equality in those states of affairs (perhaps admitting the value of well-being as a tie-breaker). This form of egalitarianism would have the power to render Misery for the Ultra-Rich false. Strong egalitarianism denies continuity. The value of any equality-improving welfare unit cannot be outweighed by any equality-worsening welfare unit. Worsening the worse-off for the benefit of the better-off is surely, on any view of the nature of equality, an exacerbation of inequality.

However, strong egalitarianism succumbs to serious problems. One such worry is the classic

Leveling-Down Objection: In a way that is unintuitive, egalitarianism suggests that in at least one possible case, the best state of affairs is achieved by simply reducing the well-being levels of the better-off class.

Strong egalitarianism clearly embraces leveling-down. Whether all instances of leveling-down are problematic is certainly controversial. Indeed, I shall argue in this paper that we should admit the value of at least a limited range

\[\text{Cf. Roger Crisp, "Equality, Priority, and Compassion" in Ethics 113 (2003).}\]

\[\text{Cf. Martha Nussbaum, Women and Human Development (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), ch. 2.}\]

\[\text{For a detailed discussion of the leveling down objection, see Nils Holtug, "Egalitarianism and the Levelling Down Objection" in Analysis 58 (1998).}\]
of instances of leveling-down. Even if this is true, however, strong egalitarianism appears to be committed to leveling-down in circumstances in which leveling-down would be uncontroversially repugnant. Strong egalitarianism will claim that leveling-down is acceptable even when the welfare level to which people are leveled-down is extremely low. Strong egalitarianism is thus unacceptable.

Most egalitarians, including Temkin, attempt to avoid the leveling-down objection by weakening their preferred egalitarianism. On a weakened view well-being maintains non-trivial value, and has value that competes with equality. But in their haste to reject any instances of leveling-down, egalitarians appear to have given up on the distinctive egalitarian axiology. In particular, they have given up on an axiology that could defend itself from Misery for the Ultra-Rich. For the egalitarian, giving up leveling-down is, in effect, accepting continuity: admitting that equality is insufficient to override the value of any welfare benefits. On this view, there will always be some additional amount of minor goods that could be granted to the better-off to justify burdens to the worse-off. Hence, on any egalitarian view that overrides Misery for the Ultra-Rich, the leveling-down objection, as I state it, applies.

So what to do? Prioritarianism succumbs to Misery for the Ultra-Rich and hence should be viewed with a strong degree of suspicion. But we have seen reason to be skeptical of virtually all ways to reject Misery for the Ultra-Rich. In the remainder of this paper, I argue that prioritarianism and egalitarianism can work together to establish a view that avoids Misery for the Ultra-Rich without absurdity.

2. Equality-Tempered Prioritarianism

For the sake of argument, let’s take the following proposal as given:

Egalitarianism: improvements in the equality of a state of affairs are intrinsically valuable.

Assume also that improvements in overall well-being are valuable along some sort of prioritarian axiology. The resulting view is pluralist: both welfare (according to prioritarian weighting) and equality are intrinsically valuable. Of course, the grand dilemma of any pluralist axiology is the problem of weight. If Egalitarianism is true, we have a choice about how to weigh the value of equality against other values. To address this issue, some terminology is in order. Call an “equality unit” an increase in the equality of

\[8\] See Temkin, Inequality.
a state of affairs by precisely one welfare unit. Conversely, an “inequality unit” is a decrease in the equality of a state of affairs by precisely one welfare unit. Assuming that the numbers correspond to amassed welfare units, the movement from A: \{x: 100, y: 10\} to B: \{x: 100, y: 11\} entails the addition of one equality unit (decrease of one inequality unit). A single unit for the worse-off will improve the equality of that state of affairs by precisely one unit. In addition, the movement from C: \{x: 100, y: 10\} to D: \{x: 99, y: 10\} is a movement of one equality unit. Multiple-person cases can also be identified in terms of equality units. The movement from E: \{x: 100, y: 100, z: 10\} to F: \{x: 101, y: 101, z: 10\} is a loss of 2 equality units, as is a move from G: \{x:100, y: 10\} to H: \{x:102, y: 10\}; the state of affairs in either case is two units of welfare further distant from the egalitarian ideal.

Given this terminology, we can return to the question of weight in the following way: how much is one equality unit worth against the value of one welfare unit? The answer, of course, is “it depends.” It depends on, first, an evaluative choice: we need to decide, in general, what the worth of a single equality unit is compared to the worth of a single welfare unit. However, it also depends crucially on another feature of the evaluation of well-being. Because the value of welfare units decreases as these welfare units are applied to persons who are better-off (given prioritarianism), if an equality unit has greater-than-zero value, this equality unit will fail to outweigh some welfare units, and will outweigh others. Hence the question of comparative evaluative weight will depend on additional facts about the welfare unit in question. Most importantly, it will depend on facts about the overall welfare level of the person whose welfare unit it is.

The following point is crucial. If the value of welfare units diminishes asymptotically to zero, there will be some point at which the greater-than-zero value of an equality unit will overtake the greater-than-zero value of a single inequality-increasing welfare. Thus we can restate our evaluative choice in the following way: at what level of welfare do we believe that an improvement in equality is more important than an additional welfare improvement for a single individual? I propose the following: an equality unit is worth more than a welfare unit for the Ultra-Rich. A welfare benefit for the Ultra-Rich does not improve the value of a state of affairs if that welfare unit generates an additional inequality unit. Hence we are left with a view that treats the value of equality units as having the power to outweigh additional welfare units for very well-off individuals. Call this view, “equality-tempered prioritarianism” (ETP).

Just exactly who is a member of the Ultra-Rich class is unclear, but this need not concern us here. The answer to this question largely depends on
our intuitions concerning *Misery for the Ultra-Rich*. There is some point at which adding minor benefits for any number of people at the cost of misery for one is simply ruled out. Thus setting the appropriate level will require inquiry into our considered judgments. However, whatever that level is, I suggest, should set the relative evaluative weight of equality units and welfare units. If this is correct, ETP has the power to rule out *Misery for the Ultra-Rich*. Because the value of an equality unit is greater than the value of a welfare unit for the Ultra-Rich, welfare units for the Ultra-Rich will not improve a state of affairs if that improvement comes at the expense of an equality unit. This view denies continuity, but only at a very high level: no amount of inequality-increasing welfare units for the Ultra-Rich will outweigh other welfare units: inequality increasing welfare units are *pro-tanto* valuable, but cannot improve the overall value of a state of affairs: the gain of an inequality unit always outweighs the gain in welfare. In *Misery for the Ultra-Rich*, each welfare unit for the better-off entails the addition of an inequality unit. Hence, no matter how many welfare units are granted to the Ultra-Rich, the overall disvalue of inequality rules out *Misery for the Ultra-Rich*.9

But if this is true, we appear to have rejected *Misery for the Ultra-Rich* without rejecting prioritarianism in favor of a view that embraces the implausible conclusions of a leximin or sufficientarianism. Furthermore, the value of equality in most cases is substantially dormant. In cases that do not involve the Ultra-Rich, a prioritarian value function determines the overall rank-ordering of states of affairs.10 But, given *Misery for the Ultra-Rich*, it is important to temper prioritarianism at high levels. And ETP does just that.

3. Objections

There are several objections to my proposal to temper prioritarianism with the non-zero value of equality units. There are two crucial objections I will discuss here. First, I argue that *Egalitarianism* is well-motivated, and hence the solution to *Misery for the Ultra-Rich* embodied in ETP is not *ad hoc*.

---

9Furthermore, even if the assumption that I made at the beginning of this paper, viz., that the overall value of single welfare benefits diminishes asymptotically to zero, is false, there is reason to set the value of a single equality unit greater than the value to which single welfare units diminish asymptotically.

10With one caveat: the value of equality might be sufficient to boost the value of improvements to the worse-off in a way that might override the judgments of an equality un-tempered prioritarianism in rare cases. The resulting value curve, is fully prioritarian until one reaches the level of the Ultra-Rich.
The second objection notes that if prioritarianism is tempered with equality, it is committed to leveling-down. I argue here that ETP is not committed to the most ridiculous examples of leveling-down, and the leveling-down to which it is committed should not be viewed as problematic. Rather, in these cases, leveling-down finds purchase in a strain of intuition.

3.1. Ad Hoc

So far I have assumed that equality has value. On this assumption, equality-tempered prioritarianism follows naturally assuming a prioritarian assessment of the value of welfare. But I have so far not argued that Egalitarianism is true. At this point, ETP seems to solve Misery for the Ultra-Rich without an independently plausible rationale. In other words, Egalitarianism, and with it ETP, may seem ad hoc.

At first glance, it would be rather strange if improvements to equality did not improve the value of states of affairs. After all, we often speak of the value of equality; we treat equality as a goal to be achieved, we often speak as though equality should be a basis upon which to make decisions. Hence it would be surprising if the principles by which we rank-order states of affairs included no reference to equality at all.

For instance, consider the difference between two states of affairs, each containing two persons: I: \{x: 100, y: 10\}; J: \{x: 55, y: 55\}. J is better. But why? It appears that an entirely natural answer to the question is that J is equal, I is not. Though egalitarianism is not the only view that can support B’s betterness (virtually any non-utilitarian view can do the same), egalitarianism does so in a particularly intuitive, straightforward way. It seems too complicated, for instance, to declare that B is better because a move from I to J treats the worst-off with priority, or that benefits to the worse-off are worth more, hence rendering J better than I. Speaking in terms of bare intuition, equality has at least pro tanto value: value that does not necessarily track the overall value of states of affairs, but value nonetheless.

Many have argued against Egalitarianism on person-affecting grounds. I reluctantly sidestep this debate here. Rather, I want to note that Egalitarianism maintains a positive philosophic rationale. Consider a point from Sidgwick. Sidgwick notes in The Methods of Ethics that utilitarianism must be supplemented by an egalitarian principle when it comes to ties.\(^\text{11}\) However, prioritarianism can also result in ties. For instance, assume that there

are two possibilities, one in which a worse-off person is benefited by a small amount, and another in which a better-off person is benefited by a large amount. For any prioritarian view, we can interpret the values involved such that these states of affairs result in an equal prioritarian rank. But it is surely implausible to suggest that there really is no way to decide between tied cases. Rather, just as Sidgwick did with utilitarianism, we ought to adopt an egalitarian answer—the more equal state is of greater value in cases in which the value of welfare itself is insufficient to establish an ordering. In order to properly break ties, equality must have some \textit{pro tanto} value. The value of equality is what decides, at the very least, tiebreaker cases.

Assume that the following two states of affairs generate a tie result in a prioritarian ordering: K: \{x: 25, y: 10\}, L: \{x: 20, y: 12\}. (Because no prioritarian has given a concrete value function, these numbers are arbitrary. Reinterpretation of the numbers involved is permitted depending on the specified prioritarian value function.) Is it plausible to suggest that the values of K and L are equivalent? I think the answer is no, and the reason is L’s relative equality. L is therefore better—when it comes to tie cases, the value of equality should supplement a standard prioritarian value function. Thus ETP is well-motivated. Not only can it reject \textit{Misery for the Ultra-Rich}, but it can help prioritarianism an implausible impasse in tied cases.\footnote{It is worth noting that I do not argue that ETP itself cannot generate tied cases. For the purposes of my argument, this is neither here nor there. I have not argued that it is imperative that all ties be eliminated. Rather, I have argued that prioritarian ties are implausible, and are plausibly solved by appealing to the value of equality.}

“Equality breaks ties” might seem too weak a principle to support \textit{Egalitarianism}. For instance, the value of equality, in this case, appears to be required \textit{only} in tie cases. Why not simply adopt an axiological principle like “ties to the worst-off”? This evaluative heuristic appears not to be committed to the claim that improvements in the equality of a state of affairs are intrinsically valuable in themselves. However, this proposal is hard to explain if \textit{Egalitarianism} is false. It seems most straightforward to say that ties go to the worst-off because this yields a more, rather than less, egalitarian outcome, and is better for this reason. One might reply that \textit{Egalitarianism} holds only in tie-breaker cases. This proposal might be motivated by various person-affecting principle. If, for instance, \textit{The Slogan} (which claims, roughly, that no state of affairs can be better than another in any respect unless there is someone for whom it is better in some respect) is true, one can still insist that equality breaks ties; tie cases are cases in which we have to decide between benefits for one group of persons or benefits for
another group of persons. But to accommodate \textit{The Slogan}, we must insist that the value of equality is limited to comparisons for which \textit{The Slogan} holds (this will include all cases of ties).\footnote{This proposal is similar to “conditional egalitarianism,” as argued for by Andrew Mason. Mason’s statement of conditional egalitarianism is as follows:}

Though those who accept \textit{The Slogan} might be tempted by this form of egalitarian concern, it is intuitively, and, as it were, “ontologically” bizarre. If this proposal is correct, improvements in equality are intrinsically valuable \textit{only if} the proposed movement in equality is indifferent on a prioritarian scale. But why should the value of equality “pop out” of existence when a movement toward equality is incompatible with \textit{The Slogan}? This proposal, though perhaps one way to save \textit{The Slogan}, requires an axiology that flirts more dangerously with the \textit{ad hoc} than ETP.\footnote{Compare Holtug, “A Note on Conditional Egalitarianism”. Furthermore, Holtug shows that this form of egalitarianism commits the cardinal sin of axiologies: it violates the transitivity of the “all-things-considered ‘better-than’” relation.} If equality is valuable, it is hard to see why it should be valuable only in those cases in which it is compatible with \textit{The Slogan}. Though this view would save egalitarianism from the leveling-down objection, without an independent rationale such a proposal should be rejected.

Accepting the value of equality helps to explain a plausible approach to tied cases. ETP is thus not an \textit{ad hoc} solution to \textit{Misery for the Ultra-Rich}. Rather, it has a strong and independent motivation: the truth of a prioritarian account of the value of welfare, and the truth of \textit{Egalitarianism}.

3.2. Leveling-Down

Because ETP is \textit{equality}-tempered prioritarianism, it comes equipped with standard egalitarian baggage. In particular, if I am correct about the relative value of equality units and welfare units at high welfare levels, this entails that leveling-down, which will increase the overall equality units in a...
state of affairs, will improve the state of affairs overall when applied to the Ultra-Rich. If leveling-down is unacceptable in all cases, ETP is false.

There are really two facets to this objection when it comes to ETP. The first argues that though Misery for the Ultra-Rich is implausible, this is because we are, as it were, robbing from the poor to give to the rich. But because equality units are worth more than welfare units for the Ultra-Rich, ETP would have it that the Ultra-Rich are leveled down even when there are no benefits at stake for the worst-off person. Leveling-down the better-off certainly does not improve a state of affairs even if there is a net gain in equality units.

This intuition is insufficiently fine-grained. I think that if we accept ETP we end up with a leveling-down implication that is not totally unacceptable. In fact, I argue that there is a strain of pretheoretic intuition that is prepared to accept leveling-down in precisely these sorts of cases. Consider, for instance, a state of affairs in which there are two classes, the tortured and the debutantes. Also imagine that there are two alternatives, neither of which involve making the tortured any better-off. One involves, however, giving an extra lollypop to the debutantes. Though we are tempted to say that there is, perhaps, something better about giving the lollipops to the debutantes, viz., that the debutantes will have a minor welfare benefit, it strikes me as incorrect to say that, overall, this state of affairs is better. Rather, I think a strong intuition here is that giving lollipops to debutantes, even if the tortured could not be helped in refusing to do so, makes the state of affairs worse. For the sake of trivial benefits, such a distribution has sacrificed has further relinquished an important social value: equality.

There might be residual skepticism that leveling-down could ever be justified. However, there could be many explanations for this intuition. One explanation is that leveling-down appears to violate certain deontic intuitions we have. For instance, it is often held that individuals have a right not to be harmed–interpreted as a right not to have their welfare diminished–and that violating those rights when doing so does not benefit others is impermissible, even if the right is comparatively minor (for instance, the right to one’s extra lollypop). But, of course, this sort of an intuition does not shed light on the value of leveling-down. One can be skittish about the moral requirement to level-down without being skittish about the overall value that leveling-down (in the cases in which ETP would insist on leveling-down) would add to the state of affairs. And, I claim, this is a real value. Something axiologically important is lost when the Ultra-Rich gain slightly better-tasting coffee when others are living in misery.

However, this reply is not sufficient to defeat all seemingly unintuitive
implications of ETP. If the value of one equality unit is \( y \), and if the value of one welfare unit for a member of the Ultra-Rich is set at \( z \), ETP will hold that \( y > z \). If so, ETP will declare that even if everyone is Ultra-Rich or better (i.e., the state of affairs is \( \text{all debutantes} \)), leveling-down adds value to the state of affairs. So, for instance, if the choice is between M: \( \{x=1000, y=1000\} \) and N: \( \{x=1000, y=1100\} \), ETP would pick M (assume that 1000 is roughly compatible with a person’s being Ultra-Rich). The disvalue of 100 inequality units is not outweighed by the value of 100 welfare units.

This might be thought too unintuitive to be sustainable. However, I think it is not so crazy to embrace the value of M over N. Welfare benefits, it seems to me, are crucially important for the value of states of affairs. But once these benefits reach a certain absolutely high level, their importance when it comes to improvements in the state of affairs diminishes. While welfare units are certainly of value at extremely high levels, we should hesitate to say that this value is enough to improve an overall state of affairs unless these benefits are at least neutral with regard to other important values. When these benefits compete with other social goods, given their comparative lack of importance, I am unprepared to declare that welfare benefits should automatically win. If we are at all moved to believe that equality has non-zero value, as I have argued we should be, we should not shy away from the suggestion that equality is more important than welfare benefits that mean as little as welfare benefits to the Ultra-Rich. Welfare benefits for people who are \( \text{absolutely} \) badly-off are surely enough to outweigh equality units. But I do not share this intuition when it comes to benefits for the Ultra-Rich. Hence, as we have good reasons to believe that welfare units for the Ultra-Rich are absolutely insignificant, we have good reason to believe that equality trumps these welfare units. Once persons have reached the point of being Ultra-Rich, it is not unreasonable to declare that further welfare units only improve the state of affairs overall if they do not devalue the state of affairs with respect to other important social goals, equality included. Hence I accept leveling-down. But I reject the call to alter ETP on that basis. Leveling-down in the cases mandated by ETP is not as unintuitive as might be supposed. This, at the very least, is my intuition. Even if it is not shared, however, ETP’s intuitive benefits should be enough to earn it strong consideration, despite its occasional embrace of leveling-down.