

Primitivist prioritarianism

Hilary Greaves (Oxford)

Value of Equality workshop, Jerusalem, 15-17 July 2016

From the workshop abstract...

- “Is inequality bad? The question seems almost trivial... a society of equals is more solidaristic, tolerant, and democratic... Equality... is even good for our health... But while the instrumental value of equality is not much in doubt, whether or not equality has value beyond that is a topic of intense debate... Among those who are to begin with sympathetic to curbing inequalities, three camps can be discerned. Egalitarians believe that equality is good in itself... Egalitarianism’s chief rival is the view known as prioritarianism. The other rival view [is] known as sufficientarianism.”

Q: What about utilitarianism?

- Utilitarians too
 - Agree that equality has enormous *instrumental* importance (for reasons of solidarity, tolerance, democracy, health, etc.), and therefore “are to begin with sympathetic to curbing inequalities”, but
 - Deny that equality has *intrinsic* importance. [actually, it’s unclear whether instrumental vs intrinsic value of equality is really the crux of the issue for the egal-vs-prioritarian debate... it’s not that the prioritarian’s focus is on *instrumental effects* of inequality... find a better framing?]
 - Q: So why aren’t they on the list too?
- A (I take it): Utilitarians aren’t sympathetic to curbing inequalities in *well-being* (only inequalities in *resources/income/etc.*).
 - Actually it’s unclear that the undisputed datum is really about inequalities *in well-being*. (Cf the abstract, again: “the more equally income is distributed in a given society...”)
 - Still, we could add this further datum...

The Pigou-Dalton principle

- The Pigou-Dalton Principle: A transfer of a fixed number of units of well-being from a better-off to a still-worse-off person always makes a state of affairs better.
- 'Still' worse off: we're not saying that B is better than A...

	A	B
Joe's well-being	51	41
Penny's well-being	50	60

- But we *are* saying that D is better than C:

	A	B
Joe's well-being	71	61
Penny's well-being	50	60

Two arguments for egalitarianism

- Direct argument:
 - It's an intuitive datum that equality (of well-being) is intrinsically valuable. (Temkin)
- Against the direct argument: Arguably, it's *counterintuitive* to hold that inequality (of well-being) is bad even in 'divided world' cases.
- Argument by elimination:
 - The Pigou-Dalton principle is an intuitive datum.
 - The menu of theories satisfying the Pigou-Dalton principle reads: egalitarianism, prioritarianism, (sufficientarianism).
 - Each of these aside from egalitarianism is subject to serious objections.
 - (Even) more serious than the oddness of insisting that inequality is bad in 'divided world' cases. [**Find Parfit on divided worlds?**]
- Aim of this talk:
 - Weaken the argument from elimination, by defending prioritarianism against one of the 'serious objections' (which applies only to an unnecessarily implausible *version of* prioritarianism).

Outline

1. (“Technical”) Prioritarianism defined
2. Criticism I: Prioritarianism violates the Ex Ante Pareto principle
3. Criticism II: Prioritarianism “fails to respect the separateness of persons”
4. Primitivist prioritarianism
5. Diagnosis: Prioritarians have been bullied into committing to *Technical* prioritarianism
6. Objection: Isn’t primitivist prioritarianism just utilitarianism?
7. Conclusions

(Technical) Prioritarianism defined

- The basic prioritarian intuition: it is better to give a well-being increase of a fixed size to a worse-off person than to a better-off person.
- Slightly more precisely: Well-being has diminishing marginal moral value.
- Formally: Goodness is represented by a function of the form $V(x) = \sum_i f(u_i(x))$, where
 - The index i ranges over persons;
 - $u_i(x)$ is person i 's von Neumann-Morgenstern utility level (as defined from a betterness-for- i ordering of lotteries, via decision theory), in distribution x ;
 - f is an increasing but concave transform.

Criticism I: (Technical) Prioritarianism violates the Ex Ante Pareto principle

- The function $\sum_i f(u_i)$ tells us how to evaluate *distributions* of well-being, in the absence of uncertainty.
- What about the evaluation of *lotteries* that give rise to particular distributions with particular probabilities?
- 'Ex post prioritarianism''s answer
 - ...Just incorporate uncertainty in the standard (expected-utility-theory) way...
 - So, the goodness of a lottery is represented by $V(x) = \sum_{i,j} p(j) f(u_{ij}(x))$, where
 - i ranges over persons (as before); j ranges over possible states of nature
 - $p(j)$ is the probability of the j th state of nature
 - $u_{ij}(x)$ is the i th person's vNM utility in the j th state of nature, in lottery x
 - f is an increasing but concave transform (as before)

The Ex Ante Pareto principle

- **Ex Post Pareto principle:** Let α , β be any distributions. If α is better than β for every individual (i.e., every individual has higher well-being in α than in β), then α is better than β .
- But now let A , B be any lotteries (i.e., assignments of probabilities to distributions). What about these lotteries?
- *One* way to apply 'Pareto' to lotteries: If A leads to a better outcome for every individual in every state of nature than B , then A is better than B .
 - Highly plausible, but very weak.
 - A stronger extension of EPP: the 'ex ante Pareto' principle.
- Note that we can make 'ex ante' comparative evaluations of lotteries
 - Overall/morally (as in ex post prioritarianism); and/or
 - In terms of betterness-*for* a given individual i .
- **Ex Ante Pareto principle:** If A is (ex ante) better than B for every individual, then A is better than B .
 - Still extremely plausible!

(Technical) Prioritarianism violates the Ex Ante Pareto principle

- Betterness-*for* comparisons among lotteries are given by expected vNM utilities: $V_i(x) = \sum_j p(j) u_{ij}(x)$. ('By definition.')
- Suppose (just for the sake of concreteness) that the prioritarian's "concave transform" f is the square-root operation.
- Now consider the following (one-person) lottery, involving one person, and the flip of a fair coin:

	Lottery A		Lottery B	
	H	T	H	T
u_{Olga}	0	9	4	4
$f(u_{Olga})$	0	3	2	2

- Lottery A has higher expected utility (4.5 as opposed to 4), so is better for Olga. But lottery B has higher expected *square-root*-utility, so the prioritarian judges B better morally.
- This is a really bad result (including: by prioritarian lights).

Assessing prioritarianism's violation of Ex Ante Pareto (I)

- In light of Harsanyi's (1955) Aggregation Theorem, we should have known all along that (technical) prioritarianism would violate Ex Ante Pareto – since it “isn't utilitarianism”.
- *Egalitarians* can defend violations of Ex Ante Pareto: lottery A may be ex ante better for each individual than B *but* lead to a guarantee of more ex post inequality.

	Lottery A		Lottery B	
	H	T	H	T
Olga's vNM utility (u_{Olga})	0	9	4	4
Jocasta's vNM utility (u_{Jocasta})	9	0	4	4

- But
 - Prioritarians aren't entitled to this defence; and
 - This defence anyway doesn't rationalise all of the violations of EAP to which (technical) prioritararians are committed, since those include some perfect-equality cases.

Assessing prioritarianism's violation of Ex Ante Pareto (II)

- Prioritarian attempts to defend their violations of Ex Ante Pareto:
 - “When we have to make a decision on someone else’s behalf, and we don’t know how this person would prefer us to act, [arguably] we ought to be cautious, or risk averse”. (Parfit 2012, p.423)
 - This is about deontology; it’s irrelevant to the *axiological* question (and hence to *axiological* prioritarianism).
 - Distinguish ‘needs’ vs ‘personal projects’? (Scanlon 1975, pp..659-60; Nagel 1986, pp.166-70)
 - Does not draw the line in the right place
 - Argue that the problematic cases lie outside the domain of prioritarianism? (Porter [now Sinclair] 2012)
 - Seems unlikely to work...

Criticism II: Prioritarianism “fails to respect the separateness of persons”

- Otsuka and Voorhoeve’s version of this criticism: Consider the following two *structurally* identical comparisons.

	Lottery A		Lottery B	
	H	T	H	T
Joe’s well-being	0	9	4	4

	Distribution C	Distribution D
Joe’s well-being	0	4
Penny’s well-being	9	4

- Three questions:
 - Q1: Which lottery is better for Joe: A or B??
 - Q2: Which lottery is better overall/morally: A or B?
 - Q3: Which distribution is better overall/morally: C or D?
- Two (alleged) intuitive data:
 - There *shouldn’t* be a ‘shift’ between Q1 and Q2. (Ex Ante Pareto.)
 - There *should* be a ‘shift’ between Q2 and Q3. (“The separateness of persons.”)
- Prioritarianism captures *neither* of these.

Primitivist prioritarianism

- Prioritarianism was supposed to be the view that well-being has diminishing marginal moral value.
- It doesn't have to be the view that *von Neumann-Morgenstern utility* has diminishing marginal moral value.
- Alternative view ("Primitivist prioritarianism"):
 - There is a primitive cardinal scale of well-being.
 - Von Neumann-Morgenstern utility is a concave transform of well-being (because the betterness-for-the-individual ordering of lotteries exhibits some risk aversion w.r.t. well-being).
 - Note that
 - This is highly intuitive – just as intuitive as that well-being has diminishing marginal moral value;
 - *Technical* prioritarians (however) can't say it.
 - Moral value is a concave transform of well-being (i.e., well-being has diminishing marginal moral value.)
 - The concave transform is the *same* in both cases.
- Formally: for some increasing but concave transform f ,
 - $V(x) = \sum_{i,j} p(j) f(w_{ij}(x))$,
 - $V_i(x) = \sum_{i,j} p(j) u_{ij}(x) = \sum_{i,j} p(j) f(w_{ij}(x)) = V(x)$.

Primitivist prioritarianism does not violate Ex Ante Pareto

- Primitivist prioritarianism's redescription and reassessment of Olga's predicament:

	Lottery A		Lottery B	
	H	T	H	T
Olga's well-being, w_{Olga}	0	81	16	16
Olga's vNM utility, $u_{\text{Olga}}=f(w_{\text{Olga}})$	0	9	4	4
Value of the lottery for Olga, $V_{\text{Olga}}=E[u_{\text{Olga}}]$	4.5		4	
Moral value of the lottery, $V=E[u_{\text{Olga}}]$	4.5		4	

- Primitivist prioritarianism places the 'shift' between well-being and vNM utility, *not* between vNM utility and moral value thereof. Therefore primitivist prioritarianism (unlike Technical Prioritarianism) does not violate Ex Ante Pareto.

Primitivist
prioritarianism
still does not
“respect the
separateness
of persons” ...

	Lottery A		Lottery B	
	H	T	H	T
Joe’s well-being	0	9	4	4
Joe’s vNM utility	0	3	2	2
Moral value of Joe’s well-being	0	3	2	2
	Distribution C		Distribution D	
Joe’s well-being	0		4	
Penny’s well-being	9		4	
Moral value of Joe’s well-being	0		2	
Moral value of Penny’s well-being	3		2	

- P1
 - A1: B is better for Joe than A.
 - A2: B is better overall/morally than A.
 - A3: D is better overall/morally than C.
 - No ‘shift’ (in either transition $Q1 \rightarrow Q2$, $Q2 \rightarrow Q3$).
- Thus primitivist prioritarianism “does not respect the separateness of persons”, in the sense insisted on by Otsuka and Voorhoeve.
- However, that “separateness of persons” condition is anyway highly debatable (at best).

Diagnosis

- Broome (1991) and others have:
 - urged that in order to well-define prioritarianism, one needs to say enough to pin down a cardinal scale of well-being;
 - Expressed scepticism about whether we really have any grip on a primitive cardinal scale of well-being, independent of ordinal evaluations.
- VNM utility provides at least *one* respectable way of overlaying a cardinal scale one what might otherwise be purely ordinal well-being judgments.
- Thus, in response to the “contentlessness criticism”, prioritarians have recently tended to formulate their theory as the claim that *vNM utility* has diminishing marginal moral value. (Greaves 2014)
- But this saddles the prioritarian with more problems/unwanted commitments than it is worth. The prioritarian does far better to remain ‘primitivist’.
- “There is no proposal, which would have been grotesque, to define a non-linear social welfare function on *von Neumann-Morgenstern utilities*.” (Sen 1976, p.250; emphasis in original)

Objection: The distinction between Primitivist Prioritarianism and utilitarianism is merely terminological

- Full disclosure: I agree (cf. Greaves 2016).
- But for those whose intuitions absolutely forbid them from giving up the Pigou-Dalton principle even after reflecting on the above issues, Primitivist Prioritarianism may be the best position on offer.
 - Certainly better than Technical Prioritarianism.
 - And arguably better than egalitarianism too.

References

- Broome 1991, *Weighing goods*
- Greaves 2014, "Antiprioritarianism"
- Greaves 2016, "A reconsideration of the Harsanyi-Sen-Weymark debate on utilitarianism"
- Harsanyi 1955, "Cardinal welfare, individualistic ethics, and interpersonal comparisons of utility"
- Nagel 1986, *The view from nowhere*
- Otsuka and Voorhoeve 2009, "Why it matters that some are worse off than others: An argument against the priority view"
- Porter 2012, "In defence of the priority view"
- Parfit 2012, "Another defence of the priority view"
- Scanlon 1975, "Preference and urgency"