

Prioritarianism and the Levelling Down Objection

Introduction

I shall discuss a problem that has recently been raised by Ingmar Persson for a popular view about distributive justice. The view in question is *prioritarianism*, according to which a given benefit, such as a unit of utility, has greater moral value to the extent that its recipient is worse off. Absolute prioritarianism, which is what I shall be focusing on, understands ‘worse off’ here in absolute terms, so that a given increase in a person’s utility has the same moral value regardless of how well off anyone else is.¹ One implication of this is that when some individuals are worse off and some individuals are better off, it is morally more valuable, all other things equal, to distribute a given benefit to those who are worse off. All the same, and unlike one of its main competitors, egalitarianism, prioritarianism does not see any value in achieving equality per se.

The problem is that prioritarianism may turn out to be vulnerable to what is known as the Levelling Down Objection, which is usually thought to apply only to egalitarianism and often taken to be fatal.² This is a serious problem for prioritarians because one of the primary motivations for adopting their view in the first place is precisely the vulnerability of egalitarianism to the Levelling Down Objection. The thought is, roughly, that prioritarianism

¹ For the contrast between absolute prioritarianism and one other form, relational prioritarianism, see Persson 2001: 35.

² Often, but not always. Some philosophers have argued that versions of the egalitarianism that is taken to be vulnerable to the Levelling Down Objection can be described which do not incorporate any suggestion that the relevant Pareto improvements are even in one respect bad (see for example Jensen 2003: 100-1; Tungodden 2003: 9-10). Others have argued that there is nothing particularly implausible about supposing that the relevant Pareto improvements *are* bad in one respect (see for example Brown 2003).

captures egalitarianism's concern for the worst off members of society, but without exposing it to the Levelling Down Objection. If it turns out that prioritarianism fares no better than egalitarianism after all, then it loses much of what makes it attractive. So, a great deal turns on this problem.

I shall argue that prioritarianism is immune to the Levelling Down Objection. My argument appeals to the reasoning that underlies prioritarians' ranking of states of affairs. I distinguish two different types of prioritarian reasoning and show that both of them escape the objection. I conclude by considering whether there might be any independent reason to favour one over the other.

1. Egalitarian value and prioritarian value

To start with, it is helpful to explain exactly what the Levelling Down Objection is and why some egalitarians are vulnerable to it.³ Those egalitarians are committed to a value over and above utilitarian value, which most of them are also committed to. Utilitarian value is just the value that benefits have just in virtue of the fact that they are being enjoyed by someone—a value which is independent of the extent to which that person is enjoying any other benefits, and of how her level of benefits compares to anyone else's. The value over and above this value that the relevant egalitarians are also committed to is the value of realising a state of equality in respect of the distribution of benefits. They think that it is a

³ The egalitarians in question are what Parfit calls 'teleological' egalitarians. They appeal to their favoured egalitarian principles to evaluate states of affairs. Parfit distinguishes teleological egalitarians from 'deontological' egalitarians, who evaluate not states of affairs but the way states of affairs are produced. See Parfit 1995: 3-9.

good feature of an outcome that benefits in it are distributed equally. Because of their commitment to this value, they take *departures* from equality to be, in one respect, bad, because they remove that good feature—even if these departures from equality benefit someone and harm no one. Such harmless departures from equality produce a decrease in egalitarian value even if they produce an increase in utilitarian value which outweighs it.

For example, imagine that everyone has a utility level of five. There is one extra unit of utility available for distribution. Even though egalitarians may well think it is better overall to give the extra unit to someone, the fact that once this is done things will be unequal leads them to hold that doing so is nevertheless bad in *one* respect, at least. But many people think it is absurd to see such Pareto improvements, which are better for someone and worse for no one, as bad in *any* respect. That is the Levelling Down Objection. (It is called this because if we now take away the extra unit again, we shall be ‘levelling down’ to equality, and egalitarians will, implausibly, think that this is in one respect *good*.)

Prioritarians do not care about egalitarian value, and that explains in part why they have been taken to be immune to the Levelling Down Objection. But they do care about something other than utilitarian value. They care about what we can call *prioritarian* value. Suppose that I am very badly off and you are very well off, and that there is a unit of utility that can go to only one of us. Prioritarians think that the state of affairs in which I receive it is better than the state of affairs in which you receive it—even though the amount of benefit is not, by hypothesis, better for me than it is for you. So, prioritarians are committed to a value which is such that one state of affairs can be better than a second in respect of it even though the first is not better than the second in respect of the amount of benefits being enjoyed by individuals. This is prioritarian value.

Where does this value come from? Well, prioritarians do care about utility in the following sense. In almost all cases, they think that it is better that a unit of utility is being

enjoyed by someone rather than not being enjoyed by anyone, and they never think that this is *worse*.⁴ But they give more moral *weight* to units of utility to the extent that the overall level of utility of the person enjoying them is lower.

By way of illustration, consider again the case I just described. Since I am worse off than you, if I get the unit of utility, then it will be given greater moral weight than if you get it. So, the unit of utility might have a prioritarian value of five if I get it, for example, but only two if you get it, because the prioritarian weighting of a unit of utility being enjoyed by someone at my overall level is five times its utilitarian value, whereas the weighting of a unit of utility being enjoyed by someone at your (higher) overall level is only two times the utilitarian value.

A unit's contribution to the overall moral value of a state of affairs from a prioritarian point of view is determined by its prioritarian value. So, if I get the unit, in this example, its total contribution is five. If you get the unit, meanwhile, its total contribution is only two. Prioritarianism is like egalitarianism and unlike utilitarianism, then, in that the moral value of a state of affairs, on the prioritarian view, is not simply its utilitarian value. But it has been widely supposed to be unlike egalitarianism in that commitment to the prioritarian value does not commit prioritarians to thinking that levelling down may be in one respect for the better.

⁴ In almost all cases prioritarians think that it is better that a unit of utility is being enjoyed rather than not, because in almost all cases they give units of utility positive moral weight. But they do give a unit of utility less moral weight to the extent that the person enjoying it has a higher total utility level, as I go on to explain in the main text. Some prioritarians may take units beyond a given total to have no moral weight at all. Such prioritarians would be indifferent between a state of affairs in which such units are being enjoyed and one in which they are absent. So long as prioritarians never give units of utility negative moral value, however, this will not straightforwardly expose them to a version of the levelling down objection. For even though eliminating units with zero moral value will not be in any respect worse from such prioritarians' point of view, it will not be in any respect better either. I shall ignore this complication in the main text.

2. Prioritarianism and the Levelling Down Objection

The problem for prioritarians is that this commitment to prioritarian value may, after all, expose them to the Levelling Down Objection just as much as the commitment to egalitarian value exposes egalitarians.

Let me explain. Prioritarians are committed to the claim that with every Pareto improvement there is a change in respect of prioritarian value. In one way, this is obvious. Pareto improvements introduce new units of benefit without taking any away. After a Pareto improvement, then, we can add the prioritarian value of the new units to the sum of the prioritarian value of each unit from the original, pre-Pareto state of affairs, with the result that the total prioritarian value increases. So, with every Pareto improvement, there is at least this change in respect of prioritarian value. Because of the fact that the relevant Pareto improvements always lead to an increase in total prioritarian value like this, and so levelling down always leads to a decrease in total prioritarian value, it is usually supposed that there is no respect in which levelling down makes things better as far as prioritarians are concerned. That is why prioritarianism is taken not to be vulnerable to the Levelling Down Objection.

But as well as this change, there is, as Ingmar Persson points out, another.⁵ After a Pareto improvement, benefits being enjoyed by anyone whose situation is unchanged have the same prioritarian value. But benefits being enjoyed by anyone whose situation has improved have on average a *lower* prioritarian value. For benefits make a smaller contribution, according to prioritarians, to the extent that their recipients are better off. So,

⁵ Persson 2008: 301.

after the Pareto improvement, the *average* prioritarian value per unit of benefit decreases.

This decrease, Persson says, is also a change in respect of prioritarian value.

Is it a good or a bad feature of an outcome? Although Persson does not raise the question, you might wonder, to begin with, why we should even bother asking about this. After all, the decrease is accompanied by an increase in *total* prioritarian value. When the total and the average go in different directions, why not focus on the total alone and assign no moral significance to the decrease in the average?

But there are other contexts in which it seems that we should attend to a decrease in average value even when it is accompanied by an increase in total value. A well-known case of this sort is as follows. Classical utilitarians care about total utility and assign no moral significance to average utility. But if they are right, then we should prefer a world in which a million and one people each have only one unit of utility—a miserable level, let us say, barely better than death—to a world in which ten thousand people each have one hundred units—the level of a decent quality of life.⁶ In concentrating on total value at the expense of average value, it seems that classical utilitarians miss an important respect in which a situation can become morally better or worse. So, it is not obvious that when the total and the average of some value that you care about go in different directions, you should focus on the total rather than the average.⁷ The question whether the change in the average is a good or bad feature of an outcome cannot be dismissed so easily.

⁶ This is Parfit's 'Repugnant Conclusion' (Parfit 1984: 388).

⁷ Of course, the decrease that classical utilitarians miss is a decrease in average utility *per person*, not per unit of benefit. In the sorts of Pareto improvement discussed by Persson, average prioritarian value per person actually increases. In this respect, the example is not analogous to the prioritarian example under consideration. But the example of classical utilitarianism nevertheless gives us reason to be cautious about concentrating on changes in total value at the expense of changes in average value. I am grateful to a referee for *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* for pressing me on this.

Persson, then, poses the following trilemma for prioritarianism.⁸ Suppose that prioritarians think that the decrease in average prioritarian value that the relevant Pareto improvements produce is a bad feature. In that case, although the Pareto improvement is a positive contribution to the overall value of a state of affairs, things are nevertheless in one respect worse because of this decrease in average prioritarian value. This, the first of the three horns of the trilemma, is an unwelcome result. For it now seems that the Levelling Down Objection applies after all.

Prioritarians might, alternatively, think of it as a good feature of an outcome that average prioritarian value has gone down. However, as long as anyone is enjoying *some* benefits in some state of affairs, one way to reduce the average prioritarian value of benefits further is to bring it about that no one is enjoying any benefits at all.⁹ In one respect, eliminating *all* benefits would be good. This, the second horn of the trilemma, is an even more unwelcome result.

Finally, for the third horn, suppose that prioritarians stop taking a reduction in average prioritarian value of benefits to make any difference to the goodness of an outcome at all. But in this case, Persson claims, they will be indifferent, in their overall evaluations, between a state of affairs in which a benefit goes to someone who is well off, and one in which the same benefit goes to someone who is worse off. (I examine the reasoning behind this surprising claim in the following sections.) This is not prioritarianism, however, but utilitarianism.

⁸ What follows is a reconstruction of Persson's trilemma in my own words.

⁹ Strictly speaking, since the average prioritarian value of benefits would in this case be the total prioritarian value (i.e. 0) divided by the number of units (i.e. 0), what would have been brought about would not be a *reduction* in the average prioritarian value—for 0/0 is indeterminate. (I am grateful to a referee for *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* for pointing this out.) I let this pass, however, for the sake of argument.

3. Why prioritarrians are safe from the Levelling Down Objection

As I said at the outset, this objection is not decisive. To see why not, though, we have to consider the reasoning behind the prioritarian ranking of states of affairs in more depth.

The objection holds that if prioritarrians are to avoid the first two horns, then their only option is to stop supposing that the average prioritarian value of benefits makes any difference to the goodness of an outcome at all, and this turns them into utilitarians. But it is not in fact obvious that taking no stand on the goodness or badness of changes in the *average* value of benefits turns prioritarrians into utilitarians. For they can be indifferent to changes in average unit value without becoming utilitarians at least so long as such changes imply no change in the *actual* unit value of benefits.

If they are indifferent to changes in *actual* unit value of benefits, then prioritarrians may seem to be indifferent to prioritarian value *simpliciter*, which would suggest that they are utilitarians after all. For indifference to changes in actual unit value might be thought to entail indifference about whether a unit of benefit goes to someone better off or to someone worse off. (In fact, this supposition is questionable, but I let it pass for the sake of argument in this section and return to it in section 4.) The question, then, is this: are prioritarrians who opt for the third horn indifferent to the actual prioritarian value of benefits?

The answer is that there is no good reason to think they are. For although it may not be obvious at first, the Pareto improvements in question do not, on a plausible conception of prioritarianism, represent changes in the actual prioritarian value of any units of benefit.

Let me outline that plausible conception, which I shall call the ‘standard conception’. What we need to make sense of is why a prioritarian thinks, for example, that the total utility being enjoyed by someone at level one hundred does not make double the contribution to a

state of affairs' prioritarian value that the total utility being enjoyed by someone at level fifty does. As we have seen, this has to do with the fact that the utility of someone who is worse off is given greater prioritarian weight than that of someone better off. But how exactly is this weighting applied? Well, the prioritarian value of any given unit that a person is enjoying remains fixed regardless of how many other units she is enjoying. It is not diminished when the person's overall level is higher and it is not increased when the person's overall level is lower. More precisely, any unit that takes a person from utility level x to level $(x+1)$ will have the same prioritarian value, regardless of the overall utility level of the person involved. But this prioritarian value of any such unit is greater than that of any unit that takes a person from level $(x+1)$ to $(x+2)$. This is because the prioritarian weighting of each additional unit diminishes even as the weighting of other units that are being enjoyed by the person remains the same.

Now, call the state of affairs before the relevant kind of Pareto improvement S1 and the state of affairs after it S2. On the conception of prioritarian reasoning that I have just outlined, the prioritarian unit values of the benefits that were *already* being enjoyed in S1 by any given individual have not changed from S1 to S2. What about the prioritarian unit values of the benefits that were introduced by the Pareto improvement? Well, these cannot have changed from S1 to S2 either, since those benefits, and therefore their prioritarian values, *did not exist* in S1.

So, although it is true to say that the *average* prioritarian unit value of benefits decreases as an individual's level of benefits increases, it is nevertheless false to suppose that this decrease in average prioritarian unit value implies a decrease in any unit's *actual* prioritarian value. The most that can be said is simply that the new benefits in the new state of affairs have lower prioritarian unit values than the old benefits, which continue to have the same

prioritarian unit values that they had formerly. There are, in other words, *no* units of benefit whose actual prioritarian value changes.

Therefore, indifference to changes in average prioritarian unit value need not imply indifference to changes in actual prioritarian value, since there can be changes in average prioritarian unit value without any changes in actual prioritarian unit values. It looks as if indifference to the changes in average prioritarian unit value, then, does not expose prioritarians to the accusation that their position is tantamount to utilitarianism. That suggests that they can occupy the third horn of the trilemma perfectly comfortably.

The following worry now arises. As we have seen, indifference to changes in actual prioritarian unit value would be fatal for the prioritarian view. I have argued that indifference to changes in *average* prioritarian unit value does not imply that, so the third horn of the trilemma is blunted. But perhaps indifference to changes in average prioritarian value is objectionable in itself. After all, was not that the lesson of the classical utilitarianism example I gave earlier? If indifference to changes in average prioritarian value is objectionable in itself, then the third horn is sharp after all, and the trilemma as a whole turns out to be fatal again.

In fact, however, there are important disanalogies between the classical utilitarianism example and the prioritarian improvements that are our focus here. Recall that in the classical utilitarianism case, utilitarians were required, as a result of their focus on total utilitarian value, to prefer a state of affairs in which a large population of individuals each have a tiny amount of utility over a state of affairs in which a smaller population is on average better off. Focusing on the average utilitarian value would have been better in this case. But there is a good explanation for this. The decrease in average utility from the small population case to the large population case reflects a morally significant fact, namely that the actual quality of individuals' lives has been changed drastically for the worse. Ignoring

the decrease in average utility is ignoring this morally significant fact, and so utilitarians are mistaken to do so by concentrating on total value instead.

There is no analogous reason for caring about changes in average prioritarian value in the case that drives the trilemma. Those changes in average prioritarian value do not reflect any worsening in the quality of individuals' lives at all, just as they do not reflect any change in the actual prioritarian value of benefits. These are morally significant matters, but indifference to changes in average prioritarian value does not render prioritarianism insensitive to them.¹⁰ Indeed, it is a distinguishing mark of the prioritarian point of view that only changes in the quality of individuals' lives are distributively significant.

4. An alternative conception

There is a second conception of prioritarianism on which indifference to changes in average prioritarian value *would* reflect indifference to actual prioritarian value. If there were good reasons to think that prioritarians ought to adopt this alternative conception, then Persson's trilemma might be supposed after all pose a serious difficulty for them.

¹⁰ Indifference to changes in average prioritarian value does, however, appear to expose prioritarians to Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion, since the addition of new individuals with even minimal levels of utility will increase the total prioritarian value of a state of affairs, and will therefore be better from a prioritarian point of view. But moderate egalitarianism is also fairly badly exposed to the Repugnant Conclusion, since the addition of new individuals with minimal levels of utility may in some cases (where the utility value of their benefits is not outweighed by the disvalue of any inequality that their existence creates) be better from a moderate egalitarian point of view. Moreover, moderate egalitarianism is vulnerable to the Levelling Down Objection as well. So, this does not constitute a reason to think that prioritarianism is no more attractive than egalitarianism.

As we saw, on the standard conception of prioritarianism that I described in section 3 above, the prioritarian weighting, and hence the prioritarian value, of any given unit of benefit is fixed regardless of how many *other* units she is enjoying. Further units have reduced prioritarian weighting. So, a unit that is given to someone at a low level has more prioritarian value than a unit that is given to her when she is at a higher level. This is why the total utility being enjoyed by someone at level one hundred, for example, does not make double the contribution to a state of affairs' prioritarian value that the total utility being enjoyed by someone at level fifty does.

On the alternative conception of prioritarianism, it is not the case that the prioritarian value of a given unit of benefit that a person is enjoying is fixed regardless of how many other units she is enjoying. Each additional unit makes a difference to the weighting, and hence the value, of *all* the units that a person is enjoying. On the most straightforward version of this alternative conception, the prioritarian value for any given unit is determined by a single prioritarian function which assigns it diminishing value as an individual's total utility increases. The total prioritarian value of a person's benefits is equal to the sum of the prioritarian values of each unit.¹¹ So, for example, if I have a total of five units of utility, they might all be weighted so as to have a prioritarian value of ten each, say, with the prioritarian value of my benefits taken as a whole being fifty. But if I were to be enjoying six units overall, the weighting of each unit might then be diminished so that each would be worth only nine, with the prioritarian value of all my benefits now being fifty-four.

Persson might argue that this alternative conception of prioritarianism is threatened by his trilemma. The reply to that trilemma that is available to proponents of the standard conception of prioritarianism concedes that indifference to changes in actual prioritarian unit value of benefits would turn prioritarians into utilitarians, as Persson claims. But it goes on

¹¹ I consider in footnote 12 below a view which does not make this assumption.

to point out that indifference to changes in the *average* prioritarian unit value of benefits need not imply indifference to changes in their *actual* prioritarian unit value. This reply, however, is not available to prioritaricians who endorse the alternative conception. Such prioritaricians accept that Pareto improvements of the sort that feature in Persson's argument diminish not only average but also actual prioritarian unit value.

In fact, the alternative conception is also immune to Persson's objection. For although proponents of the alternative conception cannot offer the reply that standard prioritaricians offer, they can instead simply refuse to concede in the first place that indifference to changes in actual prioritarian unit value turns them into utilitarians, as Persson contends.

In the preceding section I supposed, for the sake of argument, that indifference to changes in actual prioritarian unit value would turn prioritaricians into utilitarians, on the following grounds: if prioritaricians are indifferent to changes in actual unit value of benefits, then they may seem to be indifferent to prioritarian value *simpliciter*, which would suggest that they are utilitarians after all. For indifference to changes in actual unit value might be thought to entail indifference about whether a unit of benefit goes to someone better off or to someone worse off. But this reasoning turns out, on closer scrutiny, to be unsound. Consider the change in a unit of benefit's prioritarian value that is consequent upon its being reallocated, for example, from a worse-off person to a better-off person. Indifference to this change does not entail indifference to the change in *total* prioritarian value that is brought about by the reallocation any more than indifference to the size of the bricks from which a wall is built entails indifference to the size of the wall.

It might be objected that the bricks in a wall can change in size without any corresponding change in the size of the wall (an increase in the size of the bricks in one layer might, for example, be compensated for by a decrease in the size of the bricks in another) and that it is only this possibility that demonstrates the coherence of combining sensitivity to

overall changes with indifference to changes at unit level. Since the prioritarian value of each unit of benefit in a person's allocation is the same, on the alternative conception of prioritarianism that we are considering, there is no possibility of changes in the value of some units being compensated for by corresponding changes in the value of other units in such a way as to leave the overall value unchanged. Any change in the prioritarian value of a unit in a person's allocation of benefits entails a change in the prioritarian value of the allocation as a whole. Therefore, even if one affects to be concerned only with changes in the prioritarian value of the allocation as a whole, one cannot in fact help but be concerned also with the changes in unit value that constitute changes in the value of that whole.

This reasoning, however, is mistaken, even granting that the possibility of changes in unit value that leave the overall value unchanged is necessary to show the coherence of combining sensitivity at one level with indifference at the other. It is true that changes in the prioritarian value of a person's allocation of benefits necessarily accompany changes in the prioritarian value of the units constituting that allocation, on the alternative conception of prioritarianism. But it is not true that changes in the overall prioritarian value *of a state of affairs* necessarily accompany changes in the prioritarian values of the units of benefit constituting the total allocations of benefits in that state of affairs. Suppose that Andy has five units of benefit and Brandy has six units. The prioritarian value of each unit of benefit in this state of affairs is changed, on the alternative conception, if we reallocate one unit of benefit from Brandy to Andy, so that Andy now has six and Brandy now has five. But the overall prioritarian value of the state of affairs is unchanged. Therefore, the proponent of the alternative conception of prioritarianism can, even by the objector's lights, consistently combine indifference to changes in prioritarian unit value with sensitivity to the kinds of

changes in overall prioritarian value—changes in the overall prioritarian value of a state of affairs—and so avoid Persson’s objection.¹²

5. The standard conception versus the alternative conception

Both the standard conception and the alternative conception can, then, offer a coherent explanation of prioritarian rankings of states of affairs which escapes Persson’s objection. Is there any reason to favour one of them over the other?

Someone might offer the following reason to favour the alternative conception: “when a person receives one unit of utility at one time and then an additional unit at a later time, it is plausible to suppose, as the standard conception does, that the first has a greater prioritarian

¹² Prioritarianism is also immune to Persson’s objection on a conception that identifies actual prioritarian unit value with the marginal contribution of each unit to the total prioritarian value of all the units that a person was enjoying, and so drops the assumption that I describe in the text to note 11 above. As with the alternative conception that I describe in the main text, this view cannot be defended from Persson’s objection on the grounds that changes in the average value of a person’s benefits do not entail changes in their actual value. But—as with the alternative conception, and for similar reasons—it can resist Persson’s claim that indifference to changes in actual value entails indifference to changes in overall value.

This conception of actual prioritarian unit value is ultimately unsatisfactory for the reasons I adduce in section 5 below for rejecting the alternative conception in favour of the standard conception, viz., that it gives no way to make sense of the prioritarian assignment of different prioritarian values to each of the units of benefit in an increase of two such units. For the marginal contribution of each unit in a given total to the prioritarian value of all the units taken together will be the same. I am grateful to a referee for *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* for making me see the need to discuss this conception of actual unit value.

value than the second. But when a person receives two units simultaneously, to assign one of them greater prioritarian value than the other, as the standard conception must, would be arbitrary. It is much more plausible to suppose each unit to have the same prioritarian value, as the alternative conception does. The alternative conception is therefore to be preferred to the standard conception.”

However, the proponent of the standard conception can defend herself from this objection as follows. Suppose that someone receives, simultaneously, two units of utility that increase her utility level from 1 to 3. It is plausible to say, as we can on the standard conception, that the increase in her utility from 1 to 2 that is a component of her overall increase from 1 to 3 is more valuable, from a prioritarian point of view, than the increase in her utility from 2 to 3 that is also a component in her overall increase. In this sense, it is not arbitrary at all to assign one of the units greater prioritarian value than the other, any more than it is arbitrary to say that what enables me to pay off a £20 debt is just one of two £20 notes that fall into my lap in an unexpected windfall. It is true that it would be arbitrary to identify one rather than the other of the two units of utility as that which increases the person’s utility from 1 to 2 as opposed to from 2 to 3. But that arbitrariness is not especially troubling, for there is no need to make such an identification in the first place, any more than there is a need to identify which of the two £20 notes is the one that enables me to pay off my debt.

Alternative prioritarians are unable to argue in the same way that the increase in our imagined person’s utility from 1 to 2 is more valuable than the increase from 2 to 3. This tells against alternative prioritarianism. Moreover, if the actual prioritarian unit value of a person's benefits does decrease, in the way that the alternative conception describes, as her overall level of benefits increases, then in principle the actual prioritarian unit value of those benefits could decrease to the point where those of her benefits that prioritarians are normally

inclined to suppose are more valuable than benefits to someone else become less valuable. But this is at odds with fundamental prioritarian commitments.

To see this, imagine two people with a chronic illness that makes it very difficult to move. A pill that makes it easier to move is given to each person. They now face difficulty in earning much money, since neither is qualified to do anything but unskilled, unsatisfying work. They are then both offered training, and as a result, are able to find more satisfying work. Each of these benefits (from immobility to mobility and from mobility to satisfying work) are, let us stipulate, of equal utilitarian value. For one of them only, this work is also a platform for her to access many other benefits. As a result, on the alternative conception, the prioritarian value of the benefits to her that were produced by the pill and the training is reduced. In principle, if her total level of benefits became high enough, the actual unit values could decrease to the point where the benefit produced by the pill had a lower prioritarian value, even though it was given to someone at a lower absolute level of benefits, than the benefit produced by the training for the other person. So, alternative prioritarians would be committed to the view that a benefit which moves someone at a lower absolute level of well-being to a higher level could become morally worth less than a benefit which moves someone by the same amount from the same higher level to a still higher absolute level of well-being, because of the total level of benefits of people involved.

Prioritarians should favour, then, the standard conception of prioritarianism, since it is independently more plausible than the alternative conception. In any case, both conceptions are immune to Persson's trilemma in the ways that I have shown. I conclude that prioritarians have nothing to fear from the Levelling Down Objection.

Acknowledgment

Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the Ockham Society, Oxford, and to the 2009 Joint Session of the Mind Association and Aristotelian Society. I thank audience members for their comments and suggestions. I am also particularly grateful to Michael Otsuka and the editors of *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* for extensive discussion and criticism.

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