
Chapter 3.5

FAIRNESS, GOODNESS AND LEVELLING DOWN

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In chapter 3.1, “Measuring the burden of disease by aggregating well-being”, I argued that a measure of the burden of disease should not be influenced by considerations of fairness. The burden of disease is a matter of goodness—of the harm done by disease. Fairness should be accounted for separately; we shall need a distinct measure of fairness. So we need a goodness measure G and a fairness measure F . The value of equality is a consideration of fairness, and will need to be included in F .

When a decision has to be made, both fairness and goodness need to be taken into account. Usually, some of the options available will be fairer, and others will do more good. To compare the values of these options, fairness and goodness will need to be weighed against each other. Consequently, we shall need a combined objective, which puts fairness and goodness together. This will be some combination of G and F , making a combined measure. A simple example is just the weighed sum $G + aF$, where a is some weight. The size of a in this example reflects the relative importance of fairness compared with goodness.

Since the value of equality is a consideration of fairness, this combined measure will include the value of equality. It has sometimes been argued that treating the value of equality as a separate consideration from goodness will inevitably run up against a problem.¹

Imagine some change damages the health of the best-off people in the society, and does no good to anyone; this is called a “levelling down”. The change improves the society’s degree of equality, so it must increase F . It will also decrease G . But—the argument goes— F and G are independent. So there must be a possibility that, in the combined measure, the increase in F outweighs the decrease in G . Our accounting would then say the change is a good thing.

At least—the argument goes—we have no principled way of ruling out this possibility. Take the additive formula $G + aF$ as an example. Perhaps some suitable choice of the weight a will prevent the decrease in F from

outweighing the increase in G . But such a choice would be arbitrary. Once we have set up a distinct fairness measure to capture the value of equality, in principle it might outweigh the goodness measure when a levelling down takes place. So the argument goes.

Yet—the argument goes—levelling down cannot possibly be a good thing, because it is good for no one. So this way of accounting for the value of equality must be incorrect.

I agree that a levelling down cannot possibly be a good thing. I believe that no change can be good unless it is good for someone—I call this “the principle of personal good”. But I think this argument based on levelling down is mistaken. It is easy to construct measures G and F , and form a combined measure from them, in such a way that levelling down can never be accounted a good thing. Here is a very simple example.

Suppose there are only two people, with well-being w_1 and w_2 respectively. Let the goodness measure be the sum of well-being:

$$G = (w_1 + w_2).$$

Let the fairness measure be minus the absolute value of the difference in well-being:

$$F = -|w_1 - w_2|.$$

F measures the degree of equality in well-being. It is scaled in such a way as to be a negative number unless there is perfect equality, and in that case it is zero. Let us combine G and F in the additive fashion as $G + aF$, and choose a to be $\frac{1}{2}$. We get

$$(w_1 + w_2) - \frac{1}{2}|w_1 - w_2|.$$

This formula is strictly increasing in w_1 and w_2 . That is to say, a decrease in w_1 or in w_2 always decreases the value of the formula. This is very easy to check. So this formula implies that levelling down is always a bad thing.

According to the argument I described, my choice of a as $\frac{1}{2}$ must have been arbitrary and unprincipled. However, I chose a to ensure that my formula would conform to the principle of personal good. I take this principle to constrain our evaluation of distributions of well-being. No formula can be correct unless it satisfies this principle. So my choice was not arbitrary; it was constrained by principle.

NOTES

- 1 The argument is one version of the “levelling-down objection”. The levelling-down objection appears in Derek Parfit’s article on “Equality or priority”, but Parfit’s version of it is not the one I present here. In fact, on pp. 112–115 of “Equality or priority”, Parfit himself gives an argument that could serve as a response to the version I present here. It is close to my own response.

REFERENCES

Parfit D (2000) Equality or priority? In: *The ideal of equality*. Clayton M, Williams A, eds. Macmillan, Hampshire.

