Respects and levelling down
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Suppose you want to evaluate something – an event, or a law, or a virtue, or anything else. You might start by thinking of all the respects in which the thing is good, and how good it is in those respects. Then you might think of all the respects in which the thing is bad, and how bad it is in those respects. Then you might weigh against each other all the goods and bads in the various respects, to reach a conclusion about whether the thing is good or bad overall.

This would not be a correct way to proceed. The reason is obvious, and can be brought out by an example. Suppose you are evaluating a public policy. One respect might be the policy's effect on women; another might be its effect on people's freedom of assembly; another its effect on city dwellers; another its effect on race relations. It would be wrong simply to weigh against each other goods and bads in all these respects, because that would involve a lot of double counting. Many women dwell in cities, a reduction in freedom of assembly may be bad for city dwellers, and so on.

Evidently you should not weigh up goodness and badnesses in every respect you can think of. Before you evaluate in terms of respects, you have a previous job to do: you must choose an organized set of respects to work with. Your respects should be chosen so as to include all the good and bad features of whatever you are evaluating, but they should not overlap. They should be exhaustive and mutually exclusive. That is to say, you should *partition* the world into respects. Only once you have done that, may you start to do your evaluation respect by respect.

When you evaluate something, you often have a choice about how to partition the world. When evaluating a public policy, you might use the partition in which one respect is the policy's effect on children, another its effect on working-age people, and another its effect on retired people. Alternatively, you might use the partition in which one respect is the policy's effect on people living in cities, another its effect on people living in towns and villages, and another its effect on people living in the country.

Any principle that is formulated in terms of respects is ambiguous until the partition is specified. This complaint applies to Bertil Tungodden's 'weak principle of personal good' (in section 4 in his contribution to this symposium), to Larry Temkin's 'slogan' (in section VII of his contribution), and to the 'levelling-down objection'. As an example of the ambiguity, I shall examine the levelling-down objection below. On the other hand, Campbell Brown is careful about specifying partitions in his contribution.

This symposium is concerned with evaluating distributions of wellbeing. To illustrate the problem, I shall take the very simple example of distributions that

contain only two people. Let the people's wellbeings be w_1 and w_2. I shall also take as an example a very elementary theory of value about the goodness of these distributions.

Different partitions are available for the problem of evaluating a distribution. One partition is constituted by the two respects of aggregate wellbeing and equality of wellbeing. Call this a 'partition by aspects'. The elementary theory of value says that the goodness of a distribution in respect of aggregate wellbeing is just the total $(w_1 + w_2)$ of the people's wellbeing. It says that the badness of a distribution in respect of equality is half the difference between the two people's wellbeings: that is, $\frac{1}{2}\text{diff}(w_1, w_2)$. The two respects combine to determine the overall goodness of a distribution. The theory combines them by simple subtraction. So its formula for overall goodness is:

$$(w_1 + w_2) - \frac{1}{2}\text{diff}(w_1, w_2). \tag{A}$$

Each term in this formula shows goodness in one respect: the first term in respect of aggregate wellbeing, the second term in respect of equality.

If w_1 is greater than or equal to w_2, then $\text{diff}(w_1, w_2)$ is $(w_1 - w_2)$. If w_2 is greater than or equal to w_1, then $\text{diff}(w_1, w_2)$ is $(w_2 - w_1)$. So (A) is equivalent to:

$(w_1 + w_2) - \frac{1}{2}(w_1 - w_2)$ if w_1 is greater than or equal to w_2,
and $(w_1 + w_2) - \frac{1}{2}(w_2 - w_1)$ if w_2 is greater than or equal to w_1.
That is:

$$\left.\begin{array}{l}\frac{1}{2}w_1 + (3/2)w_2 \quad \text{if } w_1 \text{ is greater than or equal to } w_2, \\ \text{and } (3/2)w_1 + \frac{1}{2}w_2 \quad \text{if } w_2 \text{ is greater than or equal to } w_1.\end{array}\right\} \tag{B}$$

This new version of the formula partitions the world into a different pair of respects: the wellbeing of the first person and the wellbeing of the second person. Call this a 'partition by people'. (B) shows separately how much goodness the theory assigns to the two people's wellbeing. It shows that the wellbeing of the worse-off person counts three times as much in overall goodness as the wellbeing of the better-off person. This theory assigns priority to the wellbeing of the worse-off person.

We should not call it a prioritarian theory, though. The goodness it assigns to each person's wellbeing depends on the other person's wellbeing; specifically it depends on which of the two is the greater. Prioritarians rule out a comparison like this. The elementary theory of value is best considered an egalitarian theory, and not a prioritarian one.

By levelling down, I mean reducing the wellbeing of an above-average person, not as far as the average, while other people's wellbeing remains constant. In our two-person distribution, levelling down decreases the wellbeing of the better-off person, but not as far as the level of the worse-off person.

Is levelling down good in any respect, according to our elementary theory? It depends on how we partition the world into respects. Under a partition by aspects, levelling down is good in respect of equality; it decreases the negative second term in the formulation (A). But under a partition by people, levelling down in good in no respect; it increases neither term in the formulation (B). Yet (A) and (B) are merely different ways of expressing the very same theory. They are variants of the very same formula for overall goodness. So it is not clear what we should say.

The 'levelling-down objection' makes the claim that a levelling down is not good in any respect. Call this the 'levelling-down claim'. How should we understand the expression 'in any respect' in this claim? We might interpret it in various ways. First, it might be understood relative to some particular partition by respects, so it means 'in any respect in the partition'? If so, each different partition implies a different interpretation of the levelling-down claim.

Under one interpretation of the claim, the partition is by people. With this partition, nearly every theory about the goodness of a distribution will satisfy the levelling-down claim. So long as a theory implies that levelling down is not good for any person, it will satisfy this claim. Amongst theories that value equality, only extreme egalitarianism fails to satisfy it. So if the levelling-down claim is understood this way, the levelling-down objection can be effective only against extreme egalitarians.

Under a second interpretation, the partition is by aspects. With this partition, no theory will satisfy the levelling down claim if it gives any value, directly or indirectly, to equality. Prioritarian theories will not satisfy it, because they value equality indirectly; they imply that a more equal distribution is better than a less equal one, when the two distributions have the same total of wellbeing. The reason is that any theory that values equality permits a partitioning into the two aspects of aggregate wellbeing and equality. With this partition, levelling down will always cause an improvement in respect of equality. These assertions need proof. A proof appears in Karsten Klint Jensen's contribution to this symposium, and I have put a similar one at the end of this note.

A third interpretation of 'in any respect' does not make this expression relative to any partition. It understands the levelling-down claim to be that levelling down is not good in any respect that belongs to *any* possible partition. However, as I have just explained, there is a always a partition – specifically a partition by aspects – under which any theory implies levelling down is good in one respect, if it values equality at all. So no theory that values equality will satisfy the levelling down claim under this interpretation.

The upshot is that the levelling down objection is either too ineffective or too effective. Under one interpretation it is ineffective except against extreme

theories. Under other interpretations it would be effective against every theory that values equality, directly or indirectly. But this only means it cannot support prioritarianism against egalitarianism. Under this interpretation, the levelling-down claim is false, if either prioritarianism or egalitarianism is true.

I said that any theory that values equality permits a partitioning into the two aspects of aggregate wellbeing and equality, and levelling down will always cause an improvement in respect of equality. Here is a proof.

For the sake of generality, consider distributions of wellbeing across n people. The vector$(w_1, w_2, \ldots w_n)$ shows a typical distribution. Write its total wellbeing $W = w_1 + w_2 + \ldots + w_n$.

Let W_e be the total amount of wellbeing that would be equally as good as this distribution, if it were equally distributed across all the people. That is to say, let it be the amount of wellbeing such that the distribution (W_e/n, $W_e/$n, $\ldots$ W_e/n) is equally good, overall, as the given distribution ($w_1, w_2, \ldots w_n$). Call W_e the 'equal equivalent' of the given distribution.

One distribution has a greater equal equivalent than another if and only if it is a better distribution. Consequently, a distribution's equal equivalent W_e can serve as a measure of the goodness of the distribution. It is an ordinal measure.

Provided equality is valuable, directly or indirectly, a distribution's total wellbeing W will be at least as big as its equal equivalent W_e. The two amounts will be the same only if the distribution is perfectly equal. For an unequal distribution, the difference ($W - W_e$) is a measure of the badness of the distribution's inequality. It measures how much less total wellbeing could be and still achieve the same overall goodness, if only it was equally distributed. It is the amount of wellbeing wasted by inequality

Now obviously,

$$W_e = W - (W - W_e).$$

This equation shows that W_e, which measures the goodness of the distribution, can be split into two components. The first is total wellbeing W, and the second ($W - W_e$), which measure the badness of the inequality. So this equation shows a partition by the two aspects of aggregate wellbeing and equality. Levelling down reduces inequality. It therefore reduces the negative second term in ($W - W_e$). It is good in this respect.

This conclusion applies provided inequality is valuable, whether directly or indirectly. It therefore applies to prioritarian theories as well as egalitarian ones.