



DISCUSSION NOTE

EGALITARIANISM AND THE VALUE OF EQUALITY

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Egalitarianism and the Value of Equality¹

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DEREK PARFIT'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN telic and deontic egalitarianism has stimulated a large amount of discussion concerning the value of equality. Recently, egalitarians have argued that his distinction does not capture many of the plausible alternatives to deontic and telic egalitarianism. Several authors have claimed that there is a type of "conditional egalitarianism" that Parfit does not consider. I will argue that some responses to Parfit ignore the fact that the telic/deontic distinction incorporates two further distinctions between genesis and outcomes and between intrinsic and non-intrinsic valuations of equality. I will argue that although conditional egalitarianism may be a plausible response to Parfit, neither the non-intrinsic nor the intrinsic versions of it put forward to date capture one of the most plausible ways to value equality. In particular, neither intrinsic nor non-intrinsic versions of egalitarianism sufficiently articulate the relation of being "part of" another value. What I call "constitutive egalitarianism" offers an alternative way of conceiving the value of equality and constitutes a plausible defense of the value of equality. Further, the conception put forward here is better able to capture the sense in which deontic conceptions, discussed for instance by Scanlon, value equality intrinsically.

1. Telic and Deontic Egalitarianism

A natural place to start a discussion of how equality is valued is with Derek Parfit's distinction between telic and deontic egalitarianism. Parfit divides egalitarians into two broad groups: telic and deontic. Telic egalitarians believe that, "It is in itself bad if some people are worse off than others."² As such, they value equality intrinsically and not for some other reason. Deontic egalitarians value equality for some other moral reason. For instance, deontic egalitarians may value equality because it would be unfair if two people with otherwise identical claims to some resource got unequal shares of it. For Parfit, deontic views are also connected with claims about injustice, where injustice is a special kind of badness involving wrong-doing. Thus, what matters when inequalities are unjust is that they have been produced in the wrong way.

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² Derek Parfit, "Equality or Priority," *The Ideal of Equality*, ed. M. Clayton and A. Williams (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).

However, defenses of equality have proved resistant to being divided neatly between either of these distinctions. In particular, several recent authors have argued that the non-instrumental value of equality based on equality's relational properties.³ Some of these defenses have explicitly identified themselves as occupying a middle ground between intrinsic and instrumental valuations of equality, while others have made similar arguments implicitly.

Those that have made explicit claims about the non-intrinsic yet non-instrumental character of equality include Andrew Mason and Martin O'Neill.

O'Neill defends a non-intrinsic version of egalitarianism. He rightly points out that Parfit's division between telic and deontic equality does not capture all of the varieties and (certainly not the most plausible) versions of what egalitarians should believe. He argues that Parfit's claim that it is in itself bad if some people are worse off than others is "obscure," "abstract" and merely an "arithmetical" goal for egalitarians.⁴ For O'Neill, Parfit's telic egalitarianism is too pure because it does not recognize the sense in which equality is part of some other important egalitarian value. Deontic egalitarianism does not fare any better according to O'Neill in that egalitarians need not appeal to "some other moral reason," other than the value of equal states of affairs, to claim that inequality is bad.

For O'Neill, Parfit's telic egalitarianism makes a claim about the importance of states of affairs and of a certain conception of intrinsic value. He endorses the former while rejecting the latter. O'Neill claims that non-intrinsic egalitarianism offers a more plausible solution to Parfit's telic egalitarianism. His view is telic in that he accepts that egalitarians should be concerned with states of affairs, but it is not intrinsic. Drawing on Scanlon's work on inequality⁵, O'Neill connects equality's value to a range of five more fundamental reasons, such as that equality reduces excessive domination or disrespect. O'Neill's view is that:

Distributive equality is valuable because of its effects, and specifically by virtue of the fact that it brings about states of affairs that are themselves intrinsically valuable for egalitarian reasons.⁶

While he is surely correct to point out that Parfit's distinction is too narrow to capture the other (in O'Neill's terms) non-intrinsic versions of egalitarianism, O'Neill's discussion fails to properly observe the separateness of Parfit's distinction between: 1) the outcome/genesis distinction

³ See Andrew Mason, "Egalitarianism and the Levelling Down Objection" *Analysis* (2001), 61 and Martin O'Neill, "What Should Egalitarians Believe?," in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (2008), 36 No. 2.

⁴ O'Neill, "What Should Egalitarians Believe?," p. 124.

⁵ T. M. Scanlon, "The Diversity of Objections to Inequality"; Clayton and Williams, *The Ideal of Equality* (2002).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

and 2) the intrinsic/non-intrinsic distinction. The former distinction separates egalitarians according to whether the badness of inequality is a product of a faulty genesis, or because the wrong state of affairs obtains. The latter distinction categorizes egalitarians as intrinsic if they value equality in virtue of its intrinsic properties, or as non-intrinsic if equality is valued for some other reason. While overlapping, these distinctions do not neatly fit together. Telic egalitarians value equal outcomes and for intrinsic reasons, according to Parfit. For deontic egalitarians the case is not so clear-cut. They value equality because it is connected to some other moral value, but it is not clear where this leaves them in relation to the intrinsic/non-intrinsic distinction. The most obvious response is to say that deontic egalitarians think equality is valuable for instrumental reasons, because they value equality for some other moral reason, which O'Neill understands in terms of reducing social stigma, excessive domination and so on. However, this is not the only possibility for evaluating deontic egalitarianism. As I will discuss below, valuing equality for "some other moral reason" might still value equality intrinsically.

Mason too identifies versions of egalitarianism that are not captured by Parfit's distinction. He notes that Parfit associates telic egalitarianism with a narrow kind of intrinsic value that defines something as intrinsically valuable in terms of its intrinsic properties. According to this conception, associated with G.E. Moore, something is intrinsically valuable in virtue of its intrinsic properties and will have the same value in all situations. However, Mason argues that a more nuanced understanding of value shows how there are other versions of equality that escape the leveling-down objection. He argues for what he calls "conditional egalitarianism" (CE), which is the view that equality's value is conditional on other values. He offers two versions of this view. CE1 holds that equality is valuable non-intrinsically if it benefits some. CE2 holds that equality is valuable for its own sake only if at least some people benefit from it. On this latter view, equality is intrinsically but non-instrumentally valuable.⁷ Its value is based on its intrinsic properties but conditional on being part of the right context (where it benefits someone). If equality benefited no one, it would not be valuable in that context.

Mason's understanding of egalitarianism is subject to two difficulties: it is too vague on the relation of conditionality and it is not clear how it extends to deontic conceptions. He correctly points out that one version of a conditional intrinsic conception of egalitarianism is the claim that equality has value if someone benefits from it, but does not specify the relationship of part to whole that equality has to another value, in this case utility. To develop these points, we need to discuss conceptions of intrinsic value in more detail.

⁷ Mason, "Egalitarianism and the Levelling Down Objection," p. 248.

2. Intrinsic and Constitutive Egalitarianism

One issue for O'Neill, though not for Mason, is in what sense equality is valuable. We have seen that he does not intend it to be valuable in terms of a Moorean notion of stand-alone value, but this still leaves several possibilities. O'Neill acknowledges that non-intrinsic egalitarianism does not fit the telic/deontic distinction. One possible consequence of this view is that if equality is not intrinsically valuable it is merely instrumentally valuable. But this would leave egalitarians of O'Neill's stripe open to the objection that egalitarianism is too weak in the sense that a principle of equality can be jettisoned when it conflicts with another principle that is more instrumentally effective, for instance. O'Neill seems to assume that equality has final value in Korsgaard's sense. Korsgaard distinguishes between two different kinds of value. She argues that intrinsic value (where what is valued is valued for its own sake because of its intrinsic properties) should be contrasted with extrinsic value (where what is valued is valued because of some other source of value), whereas final value (where what is valued is valuable for its own sake) should be contrasted with instrumental value (where what is valued is valued as a means).⁸ This leaves open the possibility that a good can be extrinsically valuable but not be merely instrumental. On this account, literature or works of art may be worthwhile in themselves because of their role in a good life. For example, if a life which includes engaging with literature (or politics, or sport and so on) is part of what it is to lead a good life, then works of literature will be non-instrumentally valuable parts of a good life. They are, therefore, extrinsically good by virtue of their deriving their value from something else, but worthwhile in themselves because of the role they play in the good life.

In terms of Korsgaard's distinction, for O'Neill equality is extrinsically and non-instrumentally valuable because it brings about desirable states of affairs, but nonetheless not intrinsically valuable. However, there is a second possibility here for how to value equality, which is not captured in the discussion by O'Neill. The part of the above discussion of intrinsic value that is relevant to understanding the value of equality is the claim that an object can have intrinsic value in virtue of being *part of* something that itself has intrinsic value. This relationship is what I will call constitutive value.⁹

The crucial thing to note about constitutive goods is that they contribute to the value of the intrinsic good in the sense that they are one of the reasons why the good has the value that it does. The relationship here is one of part to whole. Something in such a relation is still non-

⁸ Christine Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness," *Philosophical Review* 92 (1983).

⁹ J.L. Akrill also uses the term "constituent" to describe how good A can be for the sake of B without it being a means to B, when he discusses Aristotle's account of eudaimonia in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. J.L. Akrill, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia," *Essays on Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

instrumentally valuable because it is part of a whole and derives its value from some other value, but it is intrinsically valuable because of its relation to what is intrinsically valuable. To use the example mentioned above, if the good life is comprised of valuable types of activities, such as engaging with literature etc., these activities will constitute a description of what a good life consists in.¹⁰ The value of constitutive goods derives not just from their causally contributing to the existence of an intrinsic good, but also because they are a part of what is valuable about an intrinsic good. By contrast, instrumental goods may well be causally necessary for an intrinsic good without being part of the goal or definition of the intrinsic good. For example, the good of food enables a person to lead a good life but it does not thereby constitute the good life. What separates the evaluation of these two goods in the above examples is the role they play with respect to the intrinsic good to which they contribute. Something can be constitutively valuable if it is part of something that is intrinsically valuable, without which that good would be less good and which is part of what is valuable about the good concerned. Something that merely contributed instrumentally could be replaced by another contribution and would not satisfy the above-mentioned conditions.

If a focus on the constitutive aspects of non-instrumental goods is a plausible way of understanding intrinsic value, then this offers a way of arguing for the value of equality that steers between the purely instrumental and unrealistic intrinsic valuations of equality. For example, if fairness is an intrinsic good, and part of what it is to be fair is that equal states of affairs obtain (for instance because people have equal claims to some good), then equality is a constitutive *part* of fairness. As such, it is not merely instrumentally valuable because it does not just contribute to some set of good consequences without having any value itself. The conception that I have outlined cannot be simply reduced to what Mason calls conditional egalitarianism or what O'Neill calls non-intrinsic egalitarianism. The difference is that while my view of constitutive equality is conditional in the sense that equality gains its value because of its relation to another value, it is nonetheless intrinsically valuable, because it is part of what is valuable about an intrinsic good.

3. Constituent Goods and Equality

The constituent conception of equality's value does not fit neatly into telic or deontic camps. In terms of the intrinsic/instrumental part of Parfit's distinction, like Mason's CE2, it is intrinsic but not in the Moorean sense of having the same value in all contexts. It differs from Mason's understanding in two ways. First, it offers a more explicit analysis of the relation between equality and other values through the part-whole relation. Second, valuing equality in this way offers clarification of the value

¹⁰ Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) p. 200ff.

of deontic egalitarian approaches, which Mason and others do not discuss, so my account offers greater explanatory scope than does theirs.

How deontic conceptions value equality is a complex issue. Most of the discussions of the valuations of equality discuss versions of telic egalitarianism. This is partly because, for Parfit, deontic conceptions avoid the leveling-down problem and so have not generated as much controversy. But this does not tell us how they fare according to the intrinsic/non-intrinsic distinction. Deontic conceptions are, according to Parfit, valued for some other moral reason. This might appear to mean that equality is valued instrumentally. However, deontic constitutive conceptions of equality's value need not be committed to this non-intrinsic valuation. Consider for instance, two types of reasons to object to inequalities mentioned by Scanlon. Egalitarians might object to inequalities because they a) "Preserve the equality of starting places which is required by procedural fairness" (DE1); and b) "Procedural fairness sometimes supports a case for equality of outcomes" (DE2).¹¹ In DE1, equality is required to ensure that fair procedures are not undermined in, for instance, the acquisition of property or in competition for employment. DE2 is more strongly egalitarian as it claims equal outcomes might also be a proper consequence of fair procedures. Such a principle might be invoked when individuals who are part of a cooperative scheme are said to have a claim to the benefits of that scheme. Outcomes matter because fairness demands that if people have an equal claim to something, then they have the same amount of that thing. Crucially, equality matters here for deontic reasons that relate to another moral value – in this case, fairness. Yet there is no reason to suppose that the relation of equality to fairness is non-intrinsic. If equality is part of fairness in the sense described above, then it will be intrinsically valuable in a constitutive sense.

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¹¹ Scanlon, "The Diversity of Objections to Inequality," p.46.