Introduction

Is inequality bad? The question seems almost silly. Few values appear as undisputed as that of equality. Yet, upon reflection it becomes far from obvious that equality is valuable and, if it is, what, precisely, makes it so. The puzzle is by no means a new one. Moral and political philosophers, at least for the past quarter of a century, have been vigorously debating this very question. This book attempts to make a modest contribution to this ongoing debate. Its claim is, simply, that inequality is indeed bad. Arguing for that position and explaining what exactly makes inequality bad takes, it turns out, an entire book (at the very least).

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At first glance, questioning the value of equality may seem rather puzzling. The prominence of that value in our political and moral vocabulary is undisputable. 'Equality, liberty, fraternity'; 'All men are created equal'; 'one person, one vote'; 'equality before the law': it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that these slogans are the foundations of our moral and political thinking. A distributive ideal of equality (as opposed to *formal* equality), more specifically, also has an enormous appeal as a political and social goal. We often think that a society of equals is more solidaristic, tolerant, and democratic, among other things. Equality, it has been shown by epidemiologists, is even good for our health.[1] Recent studies have also shown that contrary to a long-held myth, equality can also be good for economic growth.[2]

However, all of these phenomena succeed in showing that equality has an *instrumental* value. And, while many may not dispute that

[1] Richard G. Wilkinson, *Unhealthy Societies: The Afflictions of Inequality* (London: Routledge, 2002).
[2] Samuel Bowles, *The New Economics of Inequality and Redistribution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

equality is instrumentally valuable, it is much harder to agree on whether it is valuable independently of that. That is precisely the question that this book seeks to explore. Does equality have a non-instrumental (or intrinsic) value? This question has generated a lively debate among philosophers. Many believe that equality has no intrinsic value. In fact, some go so far as to speak of the 'empty idea of equality'.[3] This book seeks to provide a fresh perspective into this debate, and defend the view that equality (or more accurately, inequality) has a value (disvalue) independently of its effects. It argues that this value is not reducible to a concern we might have for the well-being of the worse off, nor to ensuring that individuals do not fall below some level of poverty and destitution. Instead, it claims that some inequalities, namely *arbitrary* ones, are bad in themselves, wherever and whenever we might find them.

To understand better the thesis that this book puts forward, and any potential contribution it might have to the ongoing debate, it would be useful to fill in some details about the various positions taken in it.

1 Egalitarianisms

Let us start by observing the above-mentioned distinction between formal equality, say the one encapsulated in the ideal of 'equality before the law', and distributive equality, the one that extends to the distribution of goods. This book is concerned exclusively with the latter. Next, some people may see some value, be it either instrumental or intrinsic, in distributive equality whereas other people – call them inegalitarians – oppose the very ideal.[4] This book does *not* address those latter concerns (at least not directly). It confines itself to addressing a family quarrel, if you will, among all those sympathetic to equal distributions. It is among those people, those who endorse the ideal of distributive equality, that our main question obtains. More pointedly, some of these people think that equality is good in itself (or intrinsically good, I treat these as interchangeable for now, see more below) but many

[3] Peter Westen, 'The Empty Idea of Equality', *Harvard Law Review* 95 (1982), 537–96. Some even describe egalitarianism as 'a pernicious doctrine', Harry Frankfurt, 'The Moral Irrelevance of Equality', *Public Affairs Quarterly* 14 (2000), 91.

[4] For a recent example of the latter, see George Sher, *Equality for Inegalitarians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

others think that while pursuing equality is generally a good thing, this is despite equality itself *not* being intrinsically valuable. Let us call the former view *egalitarianism*, the view this book seeks to defend.

As a third preliminary distinction, let us observe that the position known as egalitarianism often is understood to come in (what has become known as) teleological (for short, telic) and deontological (deontic) versions. *Deontic egalitarianism* is not committed to the view that equality (inequality) makes an outcome better (worse). Rather, we should aim for equality for some other reason, say because it is what justice requires, or what people deserve or have a right to. On the deontic view, inequality might be bad, say, because it denies some individuals what they are owed by comparative fairness. But it is not bad in itself. In contrast, telic egalitarianism, as the term coined by Derek Parfit and universally used since, is a view about the goodness (or badness) of such outcomes. On its most basic reading it says:

Telic egalitarianism: it is in itself bad if some people are worse off than others.[5]

It is this view that has become an object of much criticism. Consider the following two alternative outcomes, and suppose (for now) that the numbers represent individuals' welfare:

$$A = (3, 4)\ B = (2, 2)$$

Egalitarians are forced to say that B is better than A (in one respect, at least). But many may find this counter-intuitive. They would say that there is *no* respect in which B is better than A. This is of course the levelling down objection (LDO), and it is generally considered the most devastating objection to egalitarianism. It is often thought to constitute a decisive rebuttal of egalitarianism because it shows it to condone something (levelling down) that is not conceivably good for *anyone*.

Indeed, the LDO is so embarrassing for egalitarianism precisely because it offends this basic moral intuition, namely what is known as the person-affecting view (PAV; often nicknamed 'the Slogan')[6]:

Person-affecting view: one state of affairs cannot be better (worse) than another if there is no one for whom it is better (worse).

[5] Derek Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?' in M. Clayton and A. Williams (eds), *The Ideal of Equality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 84.
[6] Larry S. Temkin, *Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 256.

The PAV helps demonstrate the main reason why egalitarianism is considered problematic. Egalitarianism implies that outcome B is better than A (it is more equal) even though there is no one for whom B is better (compared to A). (One person's well-being is reduced from 3 to 2, and the other's is reduced from 4 to 2.)

Many people find the LDO, and even more so the PAV on which it is based, to be beyond dispute. In the quarter century or so since the LDO has been introduced in moral and political philosophy (by Derek Parfit and Thomas Nagel) many people have come to endorse it and its (main) implication, namely that equality as such is of no intrinsic value. Those who are persuaded by the LDO may affirm, instead, that what *is* of value is benefiting people who are worse off, and that it is more valuable than benefiting others who are better off. Instead of striving for equality we ought to assign *priority* to those who are worse off. People who hold this view have come to be known as *prioritarians*. In the simple example above, prioritarians, unlike egalitarians, would prefer A to B. A is better than B because it represents an improvement in the well-being of the worse off (and without terribly worsening the position of the better off). Prioritarianism, we can see, escapes levelling down. In assessing the goodness of states of affairs the prioritarian holds that it is not equality that makes outcomes better. What is of value, rather, is improvements to peoples' absolute position, and the worse off they are the more valuable these improvements are.

But consider the following dilemma.[7] Suppose you find yourself in Beverley Hills, in the company of Rich and Super Rich. You find an expensive bottle of wine that you can hand to either of them. (You cannot keep it, split it, sell it, or give it to anyone else apart from these two.) What should you do? Egalitarians and prioritarians both recommend that you hand it to Rich. Doing so, both views are committed to saying, would improve the state of the world. They reach the same judgement, albeit for different reasons. According to egalitarians, handing it to Rich is good because doing so would reduce the inequality between her and Super Rich. For prioritarians handing the wine to Rich amounts to benefiting the worse off, and benefiting the worse off always makes an outcome better (compared to a similarly large benefit to someone who is better off). Both views, then, recommend benefiting

[7] After Roger Crisp, 'Equality, Priority, and Compassion', *Ethics* 113 (2003), 755ff.

Rich. But some people may find it implausible that the state of the world would be improved by giving yet another fine bottle of wine to affluent people such as Rich. You may as well smash the bottle than benefit yet again such pampered individuals, one may plausibly reason. Such an intuition demonstrates that both equality *and* priority get things wrong. It is not inequality that we ought to care about, nor should we care about improving the position of those who are worse off compared to others. A third rival view about the value of distributions, known as *sufficientarianism*, captures this sentiment. According to this view, what is important is not that people have equal bundles (of welfare, income, or what have you) nor is it important to benefit the worse off (such as Rich) as such. The imperative, rather, is that people have *enough* (of whatever it is that matters, morally speaking). The view is concerned not with comparing how individuals fare in respect to one another, but rather with how well they are doing, in absolute terms. What is important, it says, is that individuals attain a certain threshold level (say, of well-being).

Equality, priority, and sufficiency are the three main ways in which philosophers, who are to begin with sympathetic to distributive equality in one way or another, tend to address the question of the value of equality. I now turn to explain how these three figure in the overall claim that I seek to advance.

2 The thesis

This book advances a simple claim. It argues that equality has a non-instrumental value, and it locates that value in the badness of being worse off compared to others, for arbitrary reasons (such as brute luck). If successful it would thus provide a '*luckist*' (or luck egalitarian) account of telic egalitarianism.

My purpose in this section is to break down that claim, and explain why and how it takes a whole book to argue for it. But before doing so I need to say something about my exclusive focus on *telic* egalitarianism. Why devote a book to that version of egalitarianism? What's so special or important about a telic (or more accurately, axiological, see below) account of egalitarianism? I have two motivations in framing the book in this way. One reason concerns luck egalitarianism, and the other concerns the debate between egalitarianism, prioritarianism, and sufficientarianism. Luck egalitarianism has received a lot of attention

over the past fifteen years (say, since the publication of Elizabeth Anderson's sweeping attack on it).[8] In a way, luck egalitarians and their detractors have mostly considered luck egalitarianism separately from the role it could play as an account of telic egalitarianism. Apart from a (very) notable exception (Larry Temkin; more on how my account differs from his later in this section) telic egalitarianism has been discussed separately and independently of luck egalitarianism. One major motivation behind this book is to finally link up the two. It might, for example, be illuminating for those interested in luck egalitarianism to think about it not as a theory of justice, for a change, but as an account of the badness of inequality. This brings me to the other reason to focus exclusively on a telic version of egalitarianism. In studying the egalitarian–prioritarian–sufficientarian debate one might be struck by the degree of cross-purposes that is going on, which is due precisely to proponents shifting back and forth between telic and deontic versions of their favoured views. As we shall shortly see, arguments that might be compelling for one version of the view (be it equality, priority, or sufficiency) might be much less compelling when applied to the other version. It is perhaps the other major theme of the book (this is evidenced particularly in Part II) that once all three views (equality, priority, and sufficiency) are examined on a level playing field (that of an axiological assessment) the shortcomings of the latter two become better exposed. There are a lot of interesting things to say about justice, fairness, and what people owe each other. This book, nevertheless, is about a theme that is somewhat different. It is concerned with how certain inequalities detract from the goodness of the state of the world.

The book defends this simple claim in three steps. First, it tries to explain what makes equality valuable (or inequality disvaluable). This entails responding to some prominent objections to telic egalitarianism. Second, it examines and for the most part rejects telic egalitarianism's close rivals. Specifically, it is argued that we should dismiss sufficientarianism and endorse a truncated version of prioritarianism. And third, it completes the defence of egalitarianism by addressing the way in which it handles two outstanding thorny issues: the tricky status of chances (as opposed to outcomes) and the putative badness of mutually consented-to

[8] Elizabeth Anderson, 'What Is the Point of Equality?' *Ethics* 109 (1999), 287–337.

inequalities (such as gifts and gambles). The overall result is, hopefully, a robust defence of the idea that neutralizing arbitrary inequalities makes outcomes better (in one respect).

I said that my claim regarding the badness of inequality is a simple one. Why, then, a whole book to back it? One reason (perhaps not the only one) is that the badness of inequality encapsulates a series of questions. *Is* inequality bad? *Why* is it bad? *When* is it bad? *Which inequalities* are bad? Inequalities of *what* are bad? *Who* is inequality bad for? Are *equalities* also bad? Is it just ex-post inequalities that are bad, or are ex-ante inequalities also bad? Is it only inequality in whole lives that is bad, or also inequalities in segments of life (whether simultaneous or not)?

It might be useful to summarize my answer to these questions as a series of claims, the arguments for which will be supplied along the way. More accurately perhaps, here is a list of claims I make about, and positions I take with regard to inequality in the book. To stress, this is just a list that may be useful for tracking the breakdown of the view taken with regard to inequality in this book. Most of these I argue for, but a minority I simply endorse without argument.

i. Inequality *is* bad. It is bad in a non-instrumental (or, if you prefer, final) way (Section 2.1).
ii. Inequality is bad when and because it leaves some people worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own. The badness of inequality is thus anchored in being arbitrarily disadvantaged relative to others (Chapter 2).
iii. The currency of morally troublesome inequality is the currency that matters most to individuals (e.g. subjective welfare) (Section 1.1).
iv. It is inequality that is bad; not equality. Equalities, no matter how arbitrary, are never bad (Section 2.5).
v. Inequality detracts from the value of outcomes. But equality does not add to the value of outcomes (Section 3.1).
vi. Morally troublesome inequalities must have (also) an intrapersonal dimension: it is bad for one to be worse off than another *because* of being worse off (than *one* could have been) for no fault of one's own (Section 3.2).
vii. The temporal unit of equality is complete lives, and nothing else (Section 3.3). This contrasts with the temporal unit appropriate for prioritarianism, which is time-slices (Chapter 7).

viii. Inequality is bad, beyond its instrumental badness, *for* those who have less than others (Chapter 4).
ix. Ex-post inequalities are intrinsically bad, but ex-ante ones are *not* (Chapter 8).
x. We know that choice is a necessary condition for rendering inequalities unproblematic. But is it also a sufficient condition? No (Chapter 9).

This makes for an ambitious set of claims, and, upon reflection, it is not surprising that it takes an entire book to address them. But there is at least one central question mentioned earlier that I would like to get out of the way now. Our concern here is the badness of inequality. But, inequality of what? The 'equality of what' question has received an enormous amount of attention by deontic egalitarians, and is of no direct interest to me here. I shall have something brief to say about it in Chapter 2, but for now let us stipulate that it refers to whatever it is that ultimately matters to individuals. My own favoured response is 'subjective welfare', but for the purposes of this introduction the reader should feel free to fill in that currency with whatever she might think it is that most matters to recipients. To anticipate some of the controversy to follow, notice that the currency of inequality that I adopt is 'that which ultimately matters *to individuals*', and not 'that which ultimately matters'.[9] I shall say more about this in the next chapter.

I have outlined more or less what my claim is. But of course, this book is not the first to defend the view that inequality is bad as such. Among others, that claim has already been ably defended, most prominently, by Larry Temkin.[10] Indeed, this book draws considerable inspiration from Temkin's work. Following him, I believe that equality has non-instrumental, unconditional value. Also like Temkin, my egalitarian account remains unpersuaded by the LDO and by, more generally, the PAV (his 'Slogan'). Third and finally, I follow Temkin in

[9] For the latter view, see John Broome, who often talks about 'the thing that ultimately matters: people's good', John Broome, *Weighing Goods: Equality, Uncertainty, and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 221. This is certainly a plausible object of moral concern (although, along with Temkin, I would deny that it exhausts our moral concerns). But it seems much less plausible as a currency of *inequality*. I shall elaborate on this in Section 1.1.

[10] Temkin, *Inequality*; Larry S. Temkin, 'Egalitarianism Defended', *Ethics* 113 (2003), 764–82; Larry S. Temkin 'Equality as Comparative Fairness', *The Journal of Applied Philosophy*, online first (2015), 1–18.

taking an ecumenical approach to the relationship between egalitarianism and prioritarianism. So why bother write yet another book defending the value of equality? For one thing because my defence of equality also differs from Temkin's, and it does so in at least three important respects: in its treatment of temporal inequality; in the way it anchors the value of equality (and by implication, the status of arbitrary *equalities*); and in identifying who inequality is bad for.

My first point of departure from Temkin concerns his approach to temporal inequalities. Should egalitarians be concerned with inequalities that occur between individuals at particular points of their lives, or only with inequalities that obtain over their entire lifetime? Temkin (along with the late Dennis McKerlie) has argued that we should be concerned by both. I want to argue, instead, that as egalitarians we ought to care only about individuals' lifetime well-being (this is covered in Section 3.3). My second point of departure from Temkin concerns his anchoring the value of equality in a desert-like sentiment. This can be gleaned, among other things, from his view that *equalities* of a certain kind can actually be bad (say, an equality of welfare between the ant and the grasshopper, or one between Hitler and Gandhi). The account offered here proposes, instead, to anchor equality in the disvalue of *arbitrary disadvantages*. Unlike desert, this value, I argue, is egalitarian all the way down. It decrees that unlike inequalities, equalities can never be bad (not, that is, for reasons of egalitarianism). This 'asymmetrical approach' is introduced in Chapter 2 and further developed in Chapter 3. The third major departure from Temkin concerns the question of who is inequality bad for. Similarly to him, I want to argue that inequality is non-instrumentally bad. It is bad even when it does not harm (compared, that is, to alternative outcomes) anyone's welfare. But the question then arises, in so far as inequality is non-instrumentally bad, is it then simply bad in general or nevertheless bad for someone in particular? Temkin endorses the former view, namely that inequality is bad in an *impersonal* way. I argue, in contrast, that the non-instrumental, non-welfare-affecting badness of inequality is still bad *for* someone (predictably, those who are worse off than others). This is the subject of Chapter 4.

Understanding these departures from (what is effectively) orthodox telic egalitarianism hopefully helps illuminate some of the modest contribution that this book seeks to make to the defence of egalitarianism.

3 The value of equality

This book makes three claims with respect to the *value* of equality. I argue, first, that contra its critics, there is indeed a non-instrumental (and unconditional) value to equality. Second, I show that that value is best accounted for in 'luckist' terms. And third, I argue that two of its chief rivals, namely sufficientarianism and *complete-life* prioritarianism, should be dismissed. It would be useful, then, to introduce the parameters of this investigation. Among other things, doing so will provide some level playing field on which we could pit the three rival quasi-egalitarian views.

Here is the first methodological point. As I already noted, this book is concerned exclusively with telic egalitarianism, and not with deontic versions of egalitarianism. One thing to signal is that the term 'telic' egalitarianism is somewhat inaccurate because 'teleological' implies that the goodness of the outcome determines the rightness of the act that lead to it. On teleological considerations, then, some outcomes might be right even when the act that led to them was wrong for some other reason (someone's rights have been violated, for example). But this is not what telic egalitarianism, at least the way Parfit intends it, and the way it has been adopted since, is about. Instead, it is meant to refer to the fact that equality (inequality) makes an outcome better (worse) *while* keeping silent on whether the quality of the outcome erases any potential wrongdoing that lead to it. For that reason the view should in fact more accurately be called 'axiological egalitarianism'.[11] This book, then, in fact seeks to defend axiological egalitarianism, but I will nevertheless conform here to standard use and speak of telic egalitarianism.

Much has been made of the telic/deontic distinction, and some of it will come up as we go along. But it is also important not to exaggerate the distinction and to be clear what it does *not* say. It is, for example, not the case that deontic egalitarianism hinges on the way in which equality came about, whereas axiological (telic) egalitarianism is consequentialist. One might hold, for example a radical understanding of fairness according to which any deviation from outcome equality is always unfair, no matter how it came about. This is a deontic view, but one that is also consequentialist. The view I want to defend is neither

[11] See Iwao Hirose, *Egalitarianism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 64–5 on this point.