

Scrooge and the Pleasure Witch

by

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Abstract:

This article shows both classical utilitarianism and egalitarianism to be inadequate normative theories. It also provides grounds for rejecting prioritarianism. A more adequate moral theory, however, would not dispense with what classical utilitarianism and egalitarianism respectively value. Rather, it would incorporate both values. An indication of how this might be achieved is provided.

I

Scrooge and the Pleasure Witch are in serious moral disagreement. Scrooge sincerely believes that he is morally justified in demanding that a very large proportion of society's material resources be given to him, while the Pleasure Witch believes, no less sincerely, that she is morally justified in demanding that those resources be given to her, instead.

Why do they hold these contrary views? Scrooge already possesses a large proportion of society's resources. But he remains miserable. And that is because he is an extremely inefficient converter of resources into his own personal happiness. Moreover, our Scrooge, unlike Dickens', is a welfarist egalitarian. He holds that the best possible world contains an equal distribution of welfare.¹ The problem for Scrooge is that, even though he owns a disproportionately large share of resources, he still enjoys less happiness than anyone else. Were he to possess considerably more of the world's resources, his happiness would be the same as everyone else's—his happiness would rise slightly while everyone else's would fall dramatically to the

¹For the purposes of this article I shall regard 'welfare' and 'happiness' as identical.

level of happiness that Scrooge would then have reached. Because he holds that the best possible world is the one in which everyone is equally happy, he is morally justified, or so he believes, in demanding even more resources than he currently possesses.

Unlike Scrooge, and like the Pleasure Wizard,² the Pleasure Witch is an extremely efficient converter of resources into her own personal happiness. But the Pleasure Witch is even more remarkable than your common or garden Pleasure Wizard because she manifests the opposite of diminishing marginal utility. With a linear increase in the resources in her possession, the happiness she enjoys increases exponentially. At present, with the exception of Scrooge, she is at the same level of happiness as everyone else. But because she is so efficient at converting resources into her own personal happiness, she makes do with far fewer resources than the rest. So why does the Pleasure Witch believe herself to be morally justified in demanding that a very large proportion of society's resources be given to her? Because she subscribes to classical utilitarianism. She holds that the best possible world is the one that contains the greatest total quantity of happiness. When resources are transferred from others to her, the total happiness increases. And this is because her increase in happiness is greater than the decrease in everyone else's. Hence, she is morally justified, or so she believes, in demanding a disproportionately high share of society's resources.

II

The moral disagreement between Scrooge and the Pleasure Witch is instructive. Let us consider in turn the counterintuitive nature of the moral demands each makes.

Scrooge seems clearly mistaken in holding that he should be given an even larger proportion of society's resources. Many would consider it highly counterintuitive that it would be a better world if happiness were levelled down so that everyone suffered the same miserable existence as Scrooge. Now, counterexamples of this kind are standardly taken to establish that equality cannot be

²See A. K. Sen, "Equality of what?" in *Choice, Welfare and Measurement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), p. 357. Pleasure Wizards are indistinguishable from Utility Monsters. For the latter, see Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 41.

a genuine moral value. But I want to argue that they do nothing of the sort. At most, their negative power lies in showing that equality cannot be the *sole* moral value. Furthermore, such counterexamples have a positive side that is rarely noticed. For they actually provide grounds for ascertaining what is of moral value. How is this so? Because the most plausible justification for rejecting the kind of levelling down that Scrooge demands would appear to be either the lowering of the total quantity of happiness or the lowering of the level of average happiness of Scrooge's society. But this strongly implies that either the total quantity of happiness or the level of average happiness is a moral value. And our Scrooge's welfarist egalitarianism fails to pay heed to that value, whichever it is, and thereby generates counterintuitive moral implications.

But the Pleasure Witch seems no less mistaken than Scrooge in holding that she should be given a disproportionately large share of society's resources. Many would consider it highly counterintuitive that it would be a better world if the Pleasure Witch were to become mindbogglingly happy while the rest were reduced to misery. Again, this is the sort of counterexample that is standardly taken to establish that neither the total quantity of happiness nor the level of average happiness can be genuine moral values. But, again, I want to argue that such counterexamples do nothing of the sort. At most, their negative power lies in showing that neither the total quantity of happiness nor the level of average happiness can be the *sole* moral value. And again, there is a positive side to counterexamples of this type that is rarely noticed: they, too, can serve to show us what is of moral value.

Before I proceed towards identifying the requisite moral value, allow me to explain why I think that such examples as these fail to rule out candidate moral values for inclusion within an adequate axiology. It is clear that, because the world the Pleasure Witch demands would contain both a large total quantity of happiness and a high level of average happiness, and regardless of whether or not either is a genuine moral value, we can safely conclude at the very least that neither the total quantity of happiness nor the level of average happiness can be the only moral value. For if either were the only moral value, then we would have no justification for rejecting the Pleasure Witch's demand for more resources. Thus, there must be some value other than the total quantity of happiness or the level of average happiness that explains our perception of disvalue in the world the Pleasure Witch demands. But we have seen that either the total quantity of happiness or the level of average happiness must be a

moral value if we are to make sense of our moral intuition that Scrooge is unjustified in demanding an even greater share of society's resources.³ Hence, the two examples of Scrooge and the Pleasure Witch in combination reveal that there must be more than one moral value.

But if there is, indeed, more than one moral value, then the example of the Pleasure Witch fails to establish that neither the total quantity of happiness nor the level of average happiness is one of the moral values, for it may well be the case that the moral value missing from her moral philosophy does all the work in generating our perception of disvalue in the world she demands. Similarly, neither does the example of Scrooge establish that equality—a value absent from the Pleasure Witch's philosophy—is not one of the moral values, for it may well be the case that either the total quantity of happiness or the level of average happiness does all the work in generating our perception of disvalue in the world he demands.⁴

Now, we have seen that there must be some moral value other than the total quantity of happiness or the level of average happiness to which the Pleasure Witch's utilitarianism pays no heed—a value that would explain the perceived disvalue in the counterintuitive implications her moral philosophy generates. And, surely, those counterintuitive moral implications point us in the direction we need to look if we are to identify the absent moral value—one that we would need to include if we are to arrive at an adequate axiology. And what seems to stand out as justifying our considered judgement that the world would most certainly not be made a better place by transferring further resources to the Pleasure Witch once she has come to possess

³It might be objected that it is the inequality in the distribution of resources that is doing the work here. But equality of resources cannot be the sole moral value, for it invites a variant of the levelling-down objection: Imagine a society comprising 100 people. Further imagine that in this particular society everyone requires their own individual pair of spectacles in order to see (assume that each person's eyes are so different from anyone else's that the spectacles cannot be shared, and further assume that without the dedicated spectacles each person would be, for all intents and purposes, blind). Unfortunately, there are only enough pairs of spectacles for 99 people. If equality of resources is the sole moral value, then destroying all of the spectacles would make the world a better place. Yet this would strike many as highly counterintuitive. And surely, only the reduction in either the total quantity of happiness or the level of average happiness can explain our intuition that the world would clearly be made far worse by removing the spectacles from the 99 who have them. For Derek Parfit's levelling-down objection, see Section VIII, below.

⁴I return to this point in Section VIII, below.

considerably more than anyone else is the resulting inequality. It is the failure of her utilitarianism to incorporate equality directly that is, surely, the explanation of its counterintuitive redistributive implications. And while classical utilitarianism, by taking inequality into account indirectly through diminishing marginal utility, might appear less counterintuitive in our world, its redistributive implications are highly counterintuitive in any world containing the Pleasure Witch. In other words, such a counterexample provides us with good reason for holding equality also to be a moral value. Because the Pleasure Witch's utilitarianism fails to pay heed to that value, it generates counterintuitive moral implications.⁵

In a nutshell, both Scrooge and the Pleasure Witch each succeed in identifying part of the moral story. The value at the core of utilitarianism—namely, happiness—is, indeed a value, as is the value at the core of welfare egalitarianism—namely, equality. However, both Scrooge and the Pleasure Witch fail in justifying their moral demands insofar as they each identify only part of the moral story.

III

Once we recognise the need for an axiology that considers both happiness and equality to be values, we can begin to construct a normative theory that judges a world that is deficient in either to be worse than a world that contains neither too little happiness nor too great an inequality. Such a theory would enable us to reject Scrooge's demand for even more resources than he currently possesses (because of the reduction in total happiness and/or the lowering of the level of average happiness that would result were his demand met), while simultaneously enabling us to reject the Pleasure Witch's demand that a very large proportion of society's resources be given to her (because of the inequality that would thereby result from meeting her demand).

But what if equality and happiness cannot be maximized simultaneously? A normative theory that holds both happiness and equality to be moral values requires

⁵It has always stuck me as odd that utilitarians appear pleased when they can cite diminishing marginal utility as establishing that in the real world the implications of utilitarianism are not as inegalitarian as one might initially fear. Unless equality counts as a moral value in its own right, why care in the least whether the implications of utilitarianism are egalitarian or not?

some method for judging cases where an increase in equality would result in a lowering of happiness and where an increase in happiness would require an increase in inequality.

Here is my initial suggestion: Call equality and total happiness ‘*contributory values*’. And call the value they together contribute towards ‘*overall value*’. *Prima facie*, it seems morally more important to reduce inequality when it is great than when it is already small. And, *prima facie*, it seems morally more important to increase happiness when it is at a low level than when it is already at an extremely high level. So, at first blush we might conclude that *contributory values contribute diminishing marginal overall value*.⁶ This would seem to imply that if the world contains an extremely high total quantity of happiness and is extremely unequal, then a reduction in inequality would be worth a significant reduction in the total happiness. It also seems to imply that if the world is extremely equal but contains a very small total quantity of happiness, then an increase in the total happiness would be worth a significant increase in inequality.

We can represent this on a graph by measuring the degree of equality in a society—a contributory value—on the x -axis, and by measuring the total quantity of happiness that the society contains—a second contributory value—on the y -axis. As overall value will increase in a north-easterly direction from the origin O , we can, in principle at least, plot *isovalue contours*, such as those represented in Figure 1.⁷ Each point on the same isovalue contour represents a world containing the same overall value as any world represented by any other point on the same contour, but any point on a contour further from the origin in a north-easterly direction represents a world containing more overall value.

But Figure 1 does not reveal which worlds can, practicably, be effectively actualised, either directly or indirectly (in the latter case by following certain rules, say, and/or by promoting certain virtues). Call the boundary of those worlds ‘*the practicability frontier*’, which is represented in Figure 2. Every possible world that

⁶See Alan Carter, “Some groundwork for a multidimensional axiology,” *Philosophical Studies* 154, 3 (2011): 389–408.

⁷A note of caution: I am not presupposing that Figure 1 (or Figure 2, which follows) could be plotted accurately. Rather, such graphs merely serve as heuristic devices. They roughly model how we might, plausibly, trade certain values. For as Aristotle writes: “We must not expect more precision than the subject-matter admits of.” *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk III (1094b).

can be actualised falls on the practicability frontier or between it and the origin O . As it is likely that, in a world of finite resources, the happier a world is, the more difficult will it be to make it even happier, and as it is likely that the more equal a world is the more difficult will it be to make it even more equal, then the practicability frontier is likely to take the shape of the frontier depicted in Figure 2.

In order to identify the best practicable world, we need to superimpose Figure 2 onto Figure 1. The result is Figure 3. And it reveals the best practicable world to be represented by point T , for all other practicable worlds fall on an isovalue contour (either drawn or omitted) that is closer to the origin O . As we can see, the best practicable world contains neither too low a total quantity of happiness nor too much inequality.⁸

Our Scrooge is, of course, mere fantasy. The world that he feels justified in demanding we bring about, because of his partial axiology that only values equality of welfare, is thus a fantasy, too. As it is not a practicable world, it is represented by point S in Figure 3 (falling beyond the practicability frontier). But irregardless of whether or not point S represents a practicable world, point T represents a world containing more overall value. Our Pleasure Witch is, of course, also mere fantasy. The world that she feels justified in demanding we bring about, because of her partial axiology that only values the total quantity of happiness, is thus a fantasy, as well. As it is not a practicable world, it is presented by point PW in Figure 3 (also falling beyond the practicability frontier). But irregardless of whether or not point PW represents a practicable world, point T represents a world containing more overall value. Hence, unlike the currently prevailing moral theories, the normative technology canvassed here enables us to respond effectively to the demands of both Scrooge and the Pleasure Witch.

⁸The isovalue contours plotted by one person might well have different slopes to those plotted by another, for the slope will depend upon how much importance each person accords to each value. Nevertheless, even if each person's point T is too far from everyone else's for there to be complete agreement on the best practicable world, we might hope for each person's point T to be close enough to everyone else's for there to be, at the very least, a measure of agreement concerning which possible worlds are unmistakably very bad ones.

IV

I have offered an initial proposal. However, as it stands, it seems too simple. For it appears that both an extreme inequality in welfare and an extreme inequality in resources contain overall disvalue.⁹ Moreover, given that different persons have different capacities for converting resources into welfare, an increase in equality of welfare could require an increase in the inequality of resources. So, it might be preferable when measuring equality on the x -axis of Figure 3 to remain continually aware that it requires resolving into equality of welfare and equality of resources. And we could, whenever required, engage in that resolution by an additional use of Figure 3—namely, by measuring equality of welfare on its x -axis and by measuring equality of resources on its y -axis.

There is also reason for resolving total happiness into the number of worthwhile lives and the level of average happiness—the total happiness being their product. For imagine a world containing only one person: a mindbogglingly happy Pleasure Witch. Further imagine that the world in question contains an abundance of resources for her to utilize. There would be no inequalities in such a world (either in happiness or in resources), there would be a large total quantity of happiness within it, and it would also contain an incredibly high level of average happiness. But that is, surely, not the best possible world. So, what is the most plausible value that we require in order to account for the deficiency in overall value within this imagined world? A striking feature is the small number of worthwhile lives that it contains, strongly suggesting that the number of worthwhile lives is itself a contributory value.

So, it might be preferable when measuring total happiness on the y -axis of Figure 3 to remain continually aware that it requires resolving into the number of worthwhile lives and the level of average happiness. And we could, whenever required, engage in that resolution by an additional use of Figure 3—namely, by measuring the number of worthwhile lives on its x -axis and by measuring the level of average happiness on its y -axis. When we do so, the world of the solitary Pleasure Witch would still be represented by point PW , and as we have already noted, the practicable world represented by point T contains far more overall value.¹⁰ Thus we

⁹See Alan Carter, “Value-pluralist egalitarianism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 99, 11 (2002): 577–99.

¹⁰This additional use of Figure 3 would also allow us to avoid the Repugnant Conclusion, for a world

have grounds for rejecting any claim that the world of the solitary Pleasure Witch is the best possible world.

In summary, we have reason for thinking that a more adequate normative theory than either classical utilitarianism or pure egalitarianism can provide would recognise both total happiness and equality as contributory values. And rather than just leaving matters there, we could rank better and worse possible worlds by measuring the total happiness in a society (which is itself resolvable into the number of worthwhile lives and the level of average happiness) on the x -axis of a graph and the degree of equality (which is itself resolvable into equality of welfare and equality of resources) on its y -axis.¹¹ If we then plot the boundary of practicable worlds, then the point where that boundary touches an isovalue contour further from the origin in a north-easterly direction than any other contour represents the best practicable world. In Figure 3, the best practicable world is thus represented by Point T . The world demanded by Scrooge would contain too small a total quantity of happiness, too low a level of average happiness, and too great an inequality of resources. The world demanded by the Pleasure Witch would contain too great an inequality of both resources and welfare. Point T , in performing well on all counts is thus, overall, a far better world than either the world demanded by Scrooge (represented in Figure 3 by point S) or that demanded by the Pleasure Witch (represented by point PW).

V

There is another respect in which my initial proposal seems too simple. Earlier, I presented a possible reason for holding that each contributory value contributes diminishing marginal overall value. For it might, indeed, be the case that we simply feel, intuitively, that adding an extra worthwhile life is less important the more worthwhile lives there are. And it might be the case that we simply feel, intuitively, that further increasing the level of average utility is less important the higher the level

containing zillions of barely happy people would then be represented by point S . And point T represents a world containing far more overall value.

¹¹Even better would be to accord each of these base-level values (number of worthwhile lives, level of average happiness, equality of welfare, and equality of resources) its own dimension. I have not attempted to do so here because I cannot pictorially represent four dimensions. However, four such dimensions could, in principle, be treated mathematically.

of average utility. In addition, it might be the case that we simply feel, intuitively, that further reducing inequality of welfare is less important the less the inequality regarding the distribution of welfare. What is more, it might be the case that we simply feel, intuitively, that further reducing inequality of resources is less important the less the inequality regarding resource distribution.

However, on closer examination it might well be the case that such moral responses are, in fact, inaccurate abstractions from a more complex set of evaluations. For, arguably, it might not in fact be the case that adding an extra worthwhile life is less important *simpliciter* the more worthwhile lives there are. Rather, it might well be that adding an extra worthwhile life at the margin often becomes progressively less important *relative to other considerations*, and it is rarely the case that there are no other relevant considerations. And, perhaps, from this we abstract to the (possibly mistaken) conclusion that simply adding an extra worthwhile life is always less important the more worthwhile lives there are.

Fortunately, in order to derive two-dimensional isovalue-contours that are convex when viewed from the origin, as in Figure 1, we do not have to rely on the claim that adding an extra worthwhile life, say, is less important *simpliciter* the greater the number of worthwhile lives. Instead, all that we require is a certain understanding of how contributory values trade off against each other. To be precise, in order to derive such (when viewed from the origin) convex isovalue-contours, all that is required is that adding an extra worthwhile life, say, is less important compared to increasing the level of average utility, say, the more worthwhile lives there are and the lower the level of average utility, and that further raising the level of average utility is less important compared to increasing the number of worthwhile lives the higher the level of average utility and the smaller the number of worthwhile lives.

Given this, the question that actually needs to be asked, then, is not whether the value of adding an extra worthwhile life remains as high the greater the number of worthwhile lives but, rather, whether the value of adding an extra worthwhile life remains as high *relative to other considerations* the greater the number of worthwhile lives. And it seems highly doubtful that it always does. Consider the case of adding a worthwhile life at a low level of happiness when there are already an extremely large number of worthwhile lives all at a high level of happiness. Adding the extra worthwhile life will increase the number of lives that are worthwhile—a plus in terms of the contribution to overall value. But it will also reduce the level of average utility

and simultaneously increase inequality (possibly of both resources and welfare)—negatives in terms of the contribution to overall value. Hence, this is a case where contributory values need to be traded off. And the reduction in the other contributory values might outweigh the increase in contributory value resulting from adding the extra worthwhile life. But when adding an extra worthwhile life has no effect on the level of average utility, equality of welfare or equality of resources, then adding that extra worthwhile life will *always* increase the overall value (assuming that we have exhausted the list of contributory values). In other words, it is not actually the case that contributory values must always contribute diminishing marginal overall value, and Figure 3 requires no such assumption.

VI

I should, perhaps, add that I would, as a matter of fact, argue for further contributory values. One that immediately comes to mind is freedom. How, then, might we ascertain what is and what is not a contributory value? We could engage in something akin to a Moorean-style ‘method of isolation’.¹² But rather than considering whether a candidate contributory value in a world containing only that candidate value was indeed a value, we could, instead, ask whether, if certain already identified contributory values were held constant across possible worlds, there would be a change in overall value if the candidate contributory value in question were varied from world to world. This seems more pertinent to an axiology that is sensitive to the relations between contributory values rather than one that considers the contribution of each to overall value as being wholly independent of the contribution of other contributory values.

So, imagine two worlds that contain the same number of worthwhile lives and the same level of average happiness. If the first world has a highly unequal distribution of welfare and the second world has a far more equal one, and if we strongly intuit that the second has more overall value, then we have reason to hold that equality of welfare is a contributory value. Now imagine two worlds that contain the same number of worthwhile lives, the same level of average happiness, and the

¹²See G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903; revised edition, ed. T. Baldwin, 1993), pp. 142, 145–47, 236, 256.

same distribution of welfare. If the first world lacks freedom and the second world contains a great deal of it, and if we strongly intuit that the second has more overall value even when the addition of freedom has no effect whatsoever either on happiness or on its distribution, then we have reason to hold that freedom is a contributory value.

VII

I have argued that in order to explain our strong intuition that the Pleasure Witch is not morally justified in demanding an even greater share of society's resources we need to recognise equality as a moral value. However, a prioritarian would certainly reject any such conclusion. For once the Pleasure Witch has become happier than anyone else, giving her any more resources would surely be at the expense of the poorest section of society. And the disvalue that we perceive in making the worst off even more worse off is sufficient to account for our response to the Pleasure Witch's demand, or so a prioritarian might argue. As prioritarians hold that we ought to allow inequalities in resources only insofar as they benefit the poorest section, they would, or so it might appear, have grounds for rejecting any further redistribution of resources in the direction of the Pleasure Witch. In other words, a prioritarian would argue that equality is not required as a moral value if we are to explain the moral intuition in question.

But consider a world divided into three classes: (1) a very small minority, who are less happy than (2) a very large majority, and (3) an incredibly happy Pleasure Witch.¹³ Imagine (a) that a large transfer of resources from the majority to the Pleasure Witch would: (i) make her unimaginably happy; (ii) reduce the happiness of the majority considerably to that slightly above the level the poor minority had previously experienced; and (iii) slightly raise the level of happiness of that poor minority to that now experienced by the large majority (perhaps because of the misplaced vicarious pleasure that the poor minority take in the celebrity Pleasure Witch's exponentially growing ecstasy). The prioritarian has no objections to such a transfer of resources from the large majority to the Pleasure Witch, for it results in a

¹³If the prioritarian were to object that a single Pleasure Witch does not constitute a class, then she or he cannot object to a world with many poor people and a single rich person whose wealth provides no benefit to the poor.

raising of the level of happiness of the poor minority. And neither does the classical utilitarian, for it increases both the total quantity of happiness and the level of average happiness (because of how unimaginably happy the Pleasure Witch becomes). But it would be highly counterintuitive to many that such a transfer of resources would make the world a better place.

Now, the prioritarian will no doubt object that this misrepresents prioritarianism, for the prioritarian might claim that she or he is concerned with the distribution of material resources and not with happiness. But imagine (b), instead, that class (1) comprises a minority who are even less efficient than Scrooge in converting resources into their own personal happiness. Further imagine that were we to transfer resources from class (2)—the large majority—to class (1)—the poor minority—many resources would simply be lost in the process. The result would be a slight increase in the resources possessed by the poor minority, with no increase in their happiness whatsoever, and a substantial decrease in the resources possessed by the majority (who would then possess the same per capita resources as the poor minority), and with an even greater decrease in their happiness. That any such transfer would make the world a better place seems highly counterintuitive. But if the prioritarian were to reply that, of course, happiness must be taken into account to some degree, then case (a) counts against prioritarianism. Whichever way the cake is cut, prioritarianism thus fails to supply the missing value that we require.

Now, the alternative axiology advocated in this article considers both happiness and equality to be values. And the normative theory here adumbrated that is based upon that axiology judges a world that is deficient in either to be worse than a world that contains neither too little happiness nor too great an inequality. Such a theory thus enables us to reject case (b), above; for the loss of resources in the transfer to the poor minority would result in a total quantity of happiness that is too small, as well as resulting in too low a level of average happiness. And this alternative normative theory also enables us to reject case (a), above; for a large transfer of resources from the majority to the Pleasure Witch would result in too great an inequality of resources.

VIII

Unfortunately, we cannot simply leave matters there because prioritarianism does not merely offer an alternative value to equality;¹⁴ it also offers a reason for rejecting equality as a moral value. But if we are to respond to the prioritarian critique of egalitarianism, then we need to consider part of Derek Parfit's seminal argument for prioritarianism.

So, why precisely does Parfit dismiss what he refers to as 'telic egalitarianism' (telic egalitarianism, unlike 'deontic egalitarianism', subscribing solely to a principle of impersonal equality)? He does so because of his particular levelling-down objection,¹⁵ which claims that pure (value-monist) egalitarians of the telic variety have no reason for preferring a world where everyone is equally sighted, say, to one where everyone is equally blind. For as Parfit writes:

Suppose...that the people in some community could all be either (1) equally well off, or (2) equally badly off. The Principle of Equality does not tell us that (2) would be worse. This principle is about the badness of inequality; and, though it would be clearly worse if everyone were equally worse off, our ground for thinking this cannot be egalitarian.¹⁶

In other words, if some are blind, and if impersonal equality of welfare is the sole value, then we could make the world a better place by depriving of their sight those who can see.

However, a normative theory that holds both happiness and equality to be moral values can enable us to make sense both of the appeal of prioritarianism and of its critique of egalitarianism. According priority to the worst off is often the best way

¹⁴If, indeed, that is what it does, given that prioritarianism derives ultimately from the contractarianism of John Rawls, and the principal focus is more upon what would be agreed to by the members of a community rather than what is of moral value.

¹⁵See Derek Parfit, *Equality or Priority?: The Lindley Lecture* (Kansas: University of Kansas, 1995), pp. 16–18.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 4.

of reducing inequality;¹⁷ and when egalitarians pay no heed either to the total quantity of happiness or to the level of average happiness they can have no objection to levelling everyone down to the level of the poorest (which is what prioritarrians usually consider to be the major flaw in egalitarianism). But a normative theory that holds both equality and happiness to be moral values enables us to reject any such levelling down (because of the reduction either in the total quantity of happiness or in the level of average happiness that would thereby ensue).

So, because the value-pluralist axiology outlined above includes the level of average utility as a contributory value it evades the prioritarian's primary complaint, for the levelling-down objection involves an obvious reduction in the level of average utility. A value-pluralist who incorporates both equality of welfare and average utility into her axiology therefore, at first glance, appears immune to this objection. Unfortunately, matters are not this straightforward because Parfit and many of those influenced by him are explicit in insisting that it is simply not the case that the equality in the blinded world is outweighed by the fall in the level of average utility, as the value-pluralist would maintain. Rather, Parfit and his followers hold that the equality within the world where all are blind adds no value whatsoever.¹⁸

However, it is possible that confusing deontic and axiological considerations and/or a slippage between deontic and axiological intuitions does much of the work here. For if one subscribed to an indirect form of consequentialism that was grounded in the axiology sketched above, then one would expect, say, the best practicable moral rules (those most likely to bring about the best practicable world) to include a rule against blinding people, or, more generally, against doing anything that makes people worse off than they would otherwise have been when doing so benefits no one. Given such a moral rule, changing the world from one where some can see and others cannot into a world that was completely devoid of sight would, clearly, be morally wrong. It would be morally wrong because the action in question would transgress a moral rule (a deontic consideration). But that does not entail that, while there would be a lot that was bad about the blind world—its low level of average utility, for one thing—there

¹⁷Interestingly, as it appears to be the case that the greater the inequality the greater the moral urgency in alleviating it, we might translate this as: the further a person is from the mean the more urgent is it to bring that person closer to the mean.

¹⁸See, for example, Andrew Mason, "Egalitarianism and the Levelling Down Objection," *Analysis* 61, 3 (2001): 246–54, especially p. 246.

would be nothing good about it—for example, its equality (an axiological consideration). And there may well be slippage from the wrongness of blinding people to an intuition of pure disvalue in a world comprising equally blind people.

More importantly, though, recall the earlier observation that it might not actually be the case that adding an extra worthwhile life is less important *simpliciter* the more worthwhile lives there are. Perhaps, as was suggested earlier, adding an extra worthwhile life is, instead, merely less important *relative to other considerations* the greater the number of worthwhile lives. Similarly, perhaps it is not the case that decreasing inequality is less important *simpliciter* the more equal a world happens to be. It might, rather, be the case that the more equal a world happens to be the less important *relative to other considerations* would be any further reduction in inequality. Well, consider the moral phenomenology that is likely to result from such an axiology. Given complete equality of welfare, the low level of average utility in the blind world would most probably be highly salient; whereas the equality of welfare would lack saliency. In which case, it would not be that equality had no value at low levels of average utility; instead, it would be that, at low levels of average utility, the value added by equality of welfare would, in effect, be far less morally visible. And that is because all of our attention would be on the strikingly low level of average utility. But that is not to say that the equality of welfare would be contributing no value whatsoever to the state of affairs under consideration. The claim that equality adds no value in the equally blind world might, rather, be a case of the disvalue of both the low level of average utility and the low level of total utility being so salient that the value added by the equality of welfare is, to some philosophers at least, invisible rather than its being nonexistent.¹⁹

It therefore seems to me that the levelling-down objection is not decisive against equality of welfare, impartially construed, when it is included as a contributory value within the kind of axiology adumbrated here.

¹⁹Perhaps such philosophers are predisposed to seeing the world as ‘half empty’: “There is not enough happiness in the world of the levelling-down objection, therefore it is all bad!”; whereas a ‘half full’ philosopher might react: “Well, at least everyone is equal!”

IX

A final observation: while the normative technology proposed above (one that is grounded in a value-pluralist axiology) allows us to deal with cases where increases in happiness are incompatible with a reduction in inequality, say, it is also worth recalling that, at the end of the day, Dickens' Scrooge made himself and those around him happier by sharing his resources. In other words, moral values do not always require trading off. On occasion, increasing one value can require increasing another. But a normative technology that can deal with worst case scenarios is, surely, preferable to one that only works in the most favourable of conditions. And it is highly unlikely that Pleasure Witches will ever exist. Nevertheless, a normative technology that informs us how to evaluate worlds that contain them seems preferable to those that are unable to do so. A moral theory that is only capable of dealing with what is presently the case is very likely to come seriously unstuck at some point in the future.

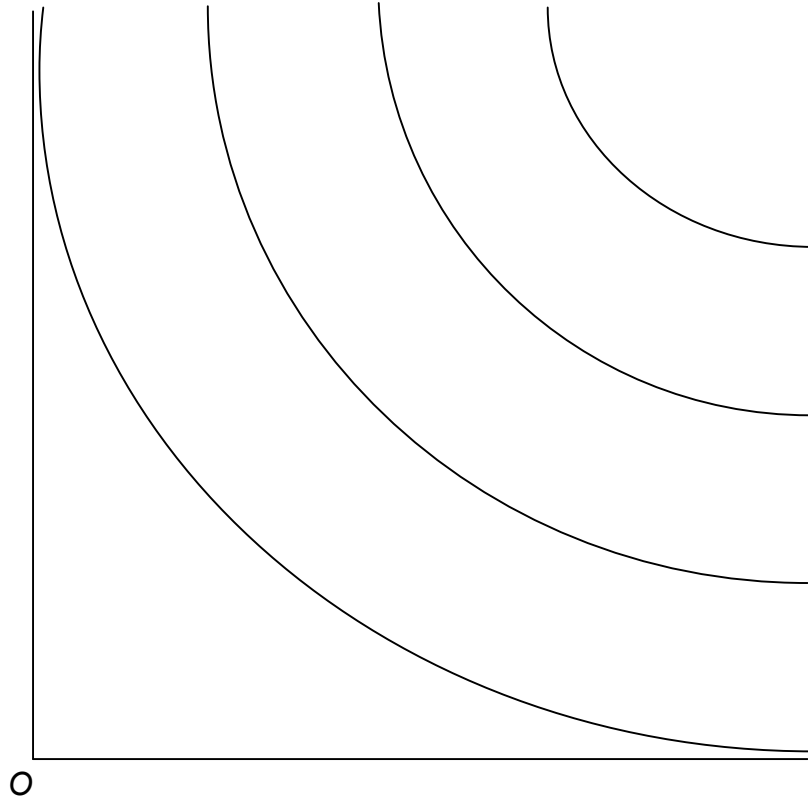


Figure 1

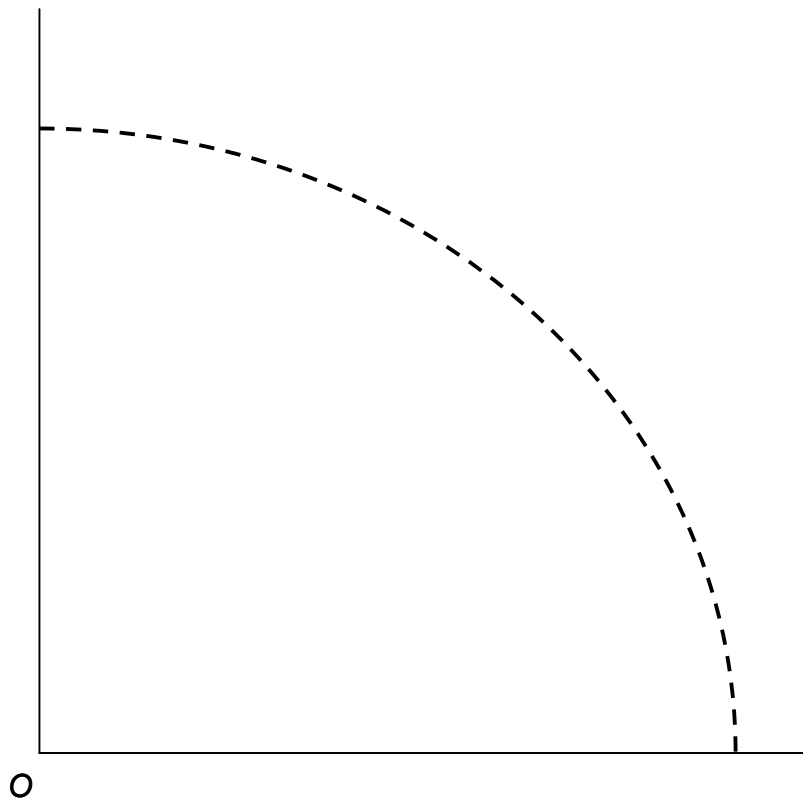


Figure 2

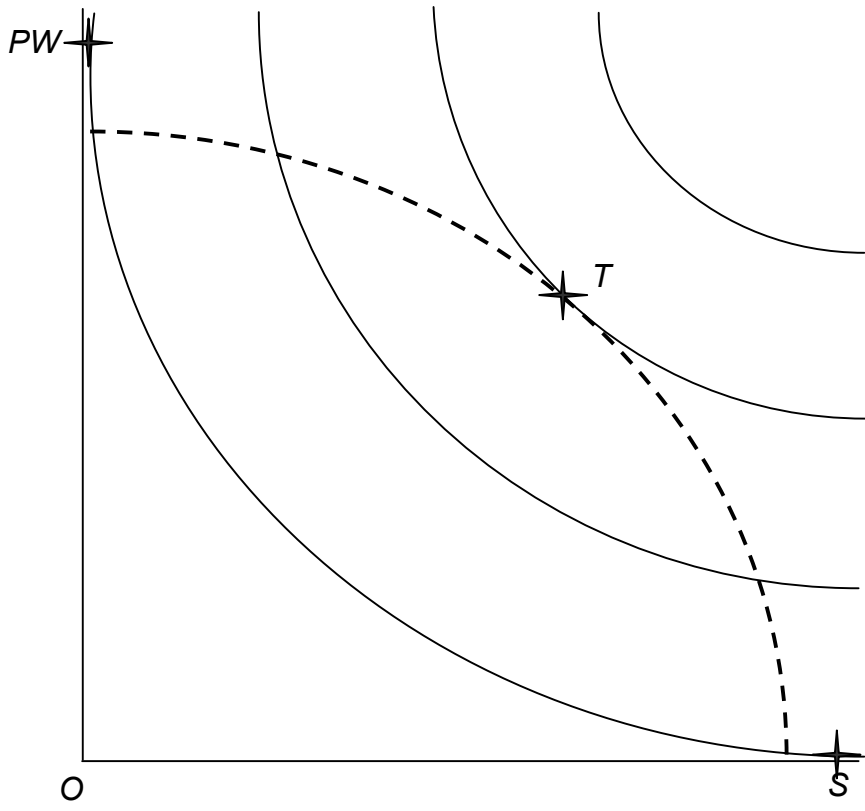


Figure 3