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Egalitarianism

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Despite the popularity of equality as a political value, egalitarianism as a political theory has never, I think, been fully or successfully defended. I aim in this paper to begin the defense of such a view. The egalitarianism I have in mind has as its ideal a condition of *equal well-being for all persons at the highest possible level of well-being*, i.e. *maximum equal well-being*. Egalitarianism holds that society should be arranged so as to promote and maintain this state. Defending such a view involves, as I see it, three tasks. First, the ideal I have just mentioned must be made clearer and more specific and its implications for the distribution of particular goods such as material possessions and liberty must be revealed. Second, positive arguments must be given in support of an equal distribution of well-being as a requirement of morality and justice. And, thirdly, arguments to the effect that there are just or justified inequalities which seriously outweigh the claims of equality must be rebutted. This paper is largely devoted to the task of clarifying and showing the practical implications of the ideal.¹ This task of for-

1 This paper is intended to be the first of a series in which the other tasks I have mentioned are also undertaken.

mulation may seem modest in comparison to the second and third tasks of providing and assessing arguments, but there are knotty problems involved in clarifying the ideal which must be resolved for egalitarianism to emerge as a plausible theory.

I proceed as follows. In section I, I differentiate the egalitarianism I favor from two other views with which it contrasts in a natural way. In section II, I begin the task of clarification by examining different theories of the good or of well-being. Sections III and IV take up the question of the coordination of the ideal of equal well-being with the distribution of certain particular goods. Section V discusses the relation for an egalitarian between equality and other moral values. And in section VI, I discuss some problems raised by special needs, physically deprived individuals and scarcity. These discussions, taken together, reveal, I believe, the structure of a systematic and plausible egalitarian theory.

A remark about ideals and their specification: by an 'ideal' I mean a very abstract conception or 'moral picture' that strikes one as cogent and compelling. The ideal of equality I have mentioned seems to me to be the compelling conception at the root of egalitarianism. The specification and application of such an ideal, however, is not merely a matter of spelling out its meaning in more detail; it involves, in addition, interpreting the ideal in light both of the complexities of life and of other dimensions of morality. The result is a complex set of practical recommendations which will be different for different contexts and problems. The theory that emerges may seem to some to be more complicated and less straightforwardly (or simplistically) egalitarian than one might expect. I hope my discussion will bear out the reasonableness of this interpretive procedure.

I. Equality, Liberalism, and Uniformity

Many who call for equality object only to particular sorts of inequalities. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, egalitarian reformers objected to inequalities based on feudal status. In the nineteenth century, with the rise of industrial capitalism, critics turned their attention to inequalities connected with economic class. While such inequalities are still with us, modern reformers have brought to attention and criticized inequalities based on race, ethnic and national status, and sex. In these cases critics object to inequalities based on what are held to be arbitrary or irrelevant characteristics. They have, however, often couched their objections by way of a positive demand for equality as such. It has been argued that they do not really favor general equality, but would con-

done much inequality so long as the arbitrary inequalities are removed. Thus H.J. McCloskey asserts that

equality has rarely been favored for its own sake. It is particular equalities that have been demanded and defended, particular inequalities condemned. Talk about favoring equality is therefore extremely misleading....²

McCloskey is certainly correct with regard to many thinkers. There is a natural and rational human tendency to back up particular demands with general principles, which may be stronger than the goals aimed at. Such principles, further, may serve as more persuasive slogans than more limited goals and may, as Marx noted, elicit the support of segments of the community which are not intended beneficiaries of the reform.

The view which objects to the particular inequalities I have mentioned but is willing to allow other inequalities is inherent in modern welfare liberalism. This liberalism can be summarized as follows: it rules out the arbitrary inequalities of race, sex, ethnic status, religion and initial position in society. But it is willing to countenance other inequalities which would be justified on one or more of the following grounds: desert and contribution, liberty and respect for rights, conduciveness to general welfare, and necessity. Such inequalities would be allowed, however, only if three background conditions are met: a) there should be no individuals or groups which fall below a minimum floor of well-being; b) the permitted inequalities should not be 'too great'; and c) there should be a good deal of equal opportunity for everyone to achieve the advantaged positions. Different theories will fill out this schema in different ways.³ Egalitarianism, in contrast, involves a commitment to equality

2 H.J. McCloskey, 'A Right to Equality? Re-Examining the Case for a Right to Equality,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 6 (1976) 632

3 Rawls' theory of justice is, I think, an example of this view; what is special to him is the specification of the floor as that which maximizes the welfare of the worst-off group, and the justification of inequalities not on the basis of the desert of those favored, but on the utility of rewarding them, that is, on the incentive value of inequalities in making everyone better off. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1971), especially Chapters II, III and V.

Other, though less clear, examples of this view can be found in W.K. Frankena, 'The Concept of Social Justice,' in R. Brandt, ed., *Social Justice* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1962) 1-29; W.K. Frankena, 'Some Beliefs about Justice,' in K.E. Goodpaster, ed., *Perspectives on Morality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press 1976) 93-106; Gregory Vlastos, 'Justice and Equality,' in Brandt, *Social Justice*, 31-72; and N. Rescher, *Distributive Justice* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill 1966) Ch. 5.

much stronger than this. It agrees with the liberal view in rejecting as arbitrary the particular inequalities mentioned above, but it does not condone the other inequalities the liberal finds justified.

The egalitarianism I favor should be differentiated not only from liberalism but from another egalitarian view which is formulated by Isaiah Berlin in his well-known essay, 'Equality.'⁴ Berlin asserts that

the ideal of complete social equality embodies the wish that *everything and everybody should be as similar as possible* to everything and everybody else....the demands for human equality which have been expressed both by philosophers and by men of action can best be represented as modifications of this *absolute* and perhaps *absurd* ideal....[The egalitarian] will tend to wish so to condition human beings that the highest degree of equality of natural properties is achieved, the greatest degree of mental and physical, that is to say, *total uniformity*...

Berlin doubts that

extreme equality of this type – the maximum similarity of a body of all but indiscernible human beings – has ever been consciously been put forward as an ideal by any serious thinker.

Nevertheless, he holds that

if we ask what kinds of equality have, in fact, been demanded, we shall see, I think, that they are specific modifications of this absolute ideal, and that it therefore possesses the central importance of an ideal limit or *idealized model at the heart of all egalitarian thought*.⁵

In sum, we have here the claim that the ideal at the 'heart' of the egalitarian tradition is a demand or wish for *absolute equality*, which in turn is understood as a demand or wish for *total similarity* and *uniformity*.

Berlin gives little argument for this proposition, taken either as the historical claim that egalitarians have embraced this ideal, or as the logical claim that they must embrace it. The ideal has been used recently by H.J. McCloskey and J.R. Lucas⁶ as a basis for subjecting

4 I. Berlin, 'Equality,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56 (1955-56) 301-26, reprinted in W.T. Blackstone, ed., *The Concept of Equality* (Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing Co. 1969) 14-34

5 'Equality,' in Blackstone, 22, 24, 25: italics added

6 H.J. McCloskey, 'Egalitarianism, Equality and Justice,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 44 (1966) 50-69; 'A Right to Equality?', 625-42. J.R. Lucas, 'Against

egalitarianism to easy ridicule. But they have attacked a 'straw man.' It is very implausible to think that an egalitarian has or must have uniformity as his fundamental aim. Why should he want or wish for uniformity? If he has a wish, it is that persons, all of them, do well, equally well, and it is a commonplace that equal well-being is at least logically compatible with the satisfaction of quite different preferences and the pursuit of different life-styles. At best the uniformity view can rest on the empirical claim that the only way to achieve equal well-being is to make people similar and treat them uniformly. On this understanding, however, uniformity is not part of the egalitarian *ideal*, but is at most a means, and a dubious one at that, to equal well-being.

II. Equality and Theories of the Good

The egalitarian should aim, I have said, for maximum equal well-being. But what is well-being? The question of what constitutes a person's well-being is a familiar one in moral and political philosophy. An answer to it is a 'theory of the good' or of 'the good life.' Let's call the view that maximum equal well-being should be sought the *egalitarian principle*. A complete egalitarian theory needs to conjoin the egalitarian principle with some theory of the good which specifies the meaning of well-being.

There are two broad types of theories of the good. First, there are those theories which understand a person's good in terms of the satisfaction of that person's actual desires or of the desires a person would have if he or she had correct information. (This is meant to rule out wanting something only because one has a mistaken factual belief about it, such as wanting to drink a glass of water, not knowing it is poisonous.) Such theories do not permit the assessment of actual or factually corrected desires, and I shall call them *subjective* theories of the good.⁷ Theories

Equality,' *Philosophy*, **40** (1965) 296-307, reprinted in H.A. Bedau, ed., *Justice and Equality* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1971) 138-51; 'Justice,' *Philosophy*, **40** (1972) 229-48; 'Against Equality Again,' *Philosophy*, **42** (1977) 255-80. I think the ideal also plays some role in H.A. Bedau's more sensitive criticism in 'Radical Egalitarianism,' in H.A. Bedau, ed., *Justice and Equality*, 168-80.

7 I borrow and modify here some terminology used by Thomas Scanlon in 'Preference and Urgency,' *Journal of Philosophy*, **72** (1975) 655-69. I draw the distinction between subjective and objective theories roughly, but I think adequately for my purposes; a more careful account of the two theories is certainly possible.

of this sort have been developed within the utilitarian tradition and modern sophisticated versions of them are the successors of the simple hedonism which identifies the good with pleasure. The second kind of theory, an *objective* theory of the good, holds that people's actual or informed desires are open to assessment, so that the satisfaction of such desires may not be good for a person. A person's good may be independent, at least to some extent, of what he happens to want, and he may come to want some things only because they are, independent of his actual or informed wants, good. The earliest philosophical example of an objective theory is Plato's.

Subjective theories are favored by many because they are neutral with respect to different substantive conceptions of the good. Objective theories are said to foist one person or group's view of the good on others, while subjective theories avoid this. For this reason, subjective theories are deeply engrained in the liberal, individualist tradition. I think, however, that subjective theories are not ultimately adequate, and that the view that objective theories must be intolerant or elitist can be avoided. I cannot, however, argue fully for these claims in this paper. In section III, I start with a subjective theory of the good but find some reasons for modifying it. In section IV, I simply assume an objective theory. I will make these assumptions explicit and explain their function in the appropriate places.

A second dimension on which theories of the good can be compared is what I shall call their content. That is, a theory of the good may put forward a list of particular sorts of things, e.g. wealth, freedom, happiness, etc., which it holds to be good for people. A subjective theory will defend its list on the ground that these are things people want or would want if correctly informed, while an objective theory will hold that such things are good for people on other grounds. In other words, a subjective or objective criterion provides the *justification* for the given content of a theory.

Consider now the view that the following are all basic elements of human well-being: material goods; individual liberty or the liberty to lead one's life as one sees fit; political liberty which includes the liberty to vote and participate in community affairs and equality before the law; self-development or the ability to develop one's powers and talents; and self-respect. Let's leave open the question of whether such a content is justified on subjective or objective grounds. The view that these are basic constituents of human good is inherent in the liberal tradition. Suppose, then, we call the theory which involves this list the liberal theory of the good.⁸ The egalitarianism I want to consider and defend

⁸ Some may cavil at calling this a liberal theory. In his recent essay 'Liberalism' (in S. Hampshire, ed., *Public and Private Morality* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univer-

combines the egalitarian principle with this theory of the good. We might call the resulting structure *Liberal Egalitarianism*. One can be an egalitarian without being a liberal egalitarian. Consider here Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor who favors equal security without liberty, or Plato's notion of equal self-development which also excludes liberty, or certain bureaucratic instantiations of Marxism which emphasize equal material well-being without freedom or self-development.

In this paper I do not argue for but presuppose the liberal theory of the good. My aim is to sketch a comprehensive liberal egalitarian theory. In the next two sections I take up the question of what happens when the egalitarian principle and the liberal theory are put together. In particular, what distribution of these basic goods is required by the ideal of equal well-being? It might be thought that there is an obvious answer; the ideal requires an equal distribution. We shall see that this is not always so, and where it is so, it is not obviously so. There are genuine complexities involved in *coordinating* the ideal with distributions of goods.

III. Goods, Satisfactions and Intensity

In order to consider the coordination issue it is important to take note of the commonplace, suggested earlier in the discussion of Berlin, that sameness of treatment is not necessarily identical with equality of treatment. If people with different preferences are given a good which some want but which others are indifferent to, they may have been treated similarly but unequally. On the other hand, spending more resources on the sick or educationally deprived may be dissimilar but equal treatment. Obviously what underlies this is the very important distinction between the good things people may receive or possess – whether these be concrete material things or intangibles such as rights and opportunities – as contrasted with the satisfactions the possession or use

sity Press 1978] 133-43), Ronald Dworkin claims that the subjective theory of the good is at the heart of liberalism. It seems to me, however, that liberalism also involves the goods I have just mentioned and this content is difficult to justify solely on subjective grounds. There is thus a tension in liberalism between the content and the justification of the good. Recall here the tension between Mill's hedonism, on one hand, and his emphasis on self-development and individuality, on the other hand. The first suggests a subjective, the second an objective, view of the good. Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures is an inadequate attempt at resolving this tension.

of these goods make possible. Giving more goods, then, to the sick or deprived is a way of bringing them to or near the same level of satisfactions as the healthy or privileged, and that is why it can be seen as equality of treatment.⁹

Let us look more carefully at the distinction between goods and satisfactions. At the root of the distinction is the fact that what a good 'does' for a person is a function of many things: whether or not he wants it, the intensity of his want, how much he wants it in comparison with other things he wants, the way its possession or use fits into his overall aims and activities, etc. By 'satisfactions' I do not mean feelings of satisfaction or pleasure – though I do not mean to exclude these – but the general contribution of the particular good to a person in light of the above factors. The crucial point for understanding the distinction is that the same level of good may make quite different contributions to different people because of their different preferences and aims. The question of how a distribution of goods affects the distribution of satisfactions will be a complex and contingent matter.

I said above that subjective theories of the good are favored by

9 The distinction between equality and sameness of treatment is clearly made by William Frankena in 'The Concept of Social Justice,' 11. The failure to make the distinction between good and satisfactions characterizes and vitiates H.J. McCloskey's attacks on egalitarianism. Consider this passage from 'Egalitarianism, Equality and Justice,' 55: treating people equally

would enjoin treating the weak and the strong, the stupid, the clever and the cunning as if they were identical. The deaf, dumb and blind would be treated in the same way as the person possessed of all his faculties. ... This equality of treatment would lead to gravely unequal states of affairs, to inequalities of power, status, wealth, privilege, etc. (italics added)

This conclusion follows only if equal treatment is defined as similar treatment but is not implied by an egalitarianism sensitive to the good-satisfaction distinction. An apparent failure to make this distinction also occurs, surprisingly, in Ronald Dworkin's contrast between equal treatment and treatment as an equal. See 'Liberalism,' 126, and *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1978) 227. For Dworkin 'equal treatment' seems to mean similar or identical treatment, 'the equal distribution of some opportunity or resource or burden.' 'Treatment as an equal,' on the other hand, means the receipt of equal concern and respect and may sometimes dictate equal treatment, sometimes not. Consider now equal treatment construed in terms of equality of satisfactions. This does not fall under Dworkin's concept of equal treatment. Does it come under treatment as an equal? Perhaps it does but that category can also be construed to involve significant inequalities of treatment. What Dworkin gives us, in effect is a contrast between sameness of treatment and a vague notion of equal concern which can be construed in a number of different ways: the notion of equality of satisfactions or well-being is simply overlooked.

many. Let us see, then, what happens if the ideal of equal well-being is interpreted in the light of such a theory. The subjective theory says that a person's well-being is constituted by his satisfactions; all satisfactions are elements of well-being, and the more satisfactions, the more well-being. This leads to the idea that egalitarianism should aim primarily at equality of satisfactions with goods distributed solely as a means to this end. I call this view the *primacy of satisfactions over goods*; the subjective theory seems to entail this. But given the diversity of people's preferences, this means that goods would have to be distributed in quite unequal amounts, i.e. the unequal amounts needed for equalizing satisfaction. So conjoining the ideal of equal well-being with the subjective theory of the good gives us this 'solution' to the coordination problem: unequal goods so as to promote equal satisfactions and well-being. And this will apply to the goods contained in the liberal theory of the good I am presupposing.

This result, however, leads to two problems. The first is a practical one. It seems unrealistic to think that society could have the detailed knowledge of individuals needed to distribute goods in the unequal manner required to attain equality of satisfactions. 'To each according to his needs or preferences' seems an unworkable criterion. There is, however, a device available to society which can go some way towards meeting this problem. Goods can be ranked in terms of their *convertibility* into other goods. Money, for example, is a highly convertible good because it is easily converted into, i.e. exchanged for, other things. It can be used by people in different ways to attain very different types of satisfactions. Liberty is also a highly convertible good in that people can use it to engage in quite different kinds of activities and projects, as suits them. Other goods, obviously, are of low convertibility. Basic social and economic institutions are geared to affecting the distribution of highly convertible goods such as money and liberty. It is thus not implausible to think that an equal distribution of such goods, given their capacity to be used in ways which meet individual wants and needs, would go some way towards producing a rough equality of satisfactions. Of course, there are important exceptions to this, as in the case of underprivileged or handicapped individuals or of those with unusually intense desires, and I shall discuss these cases in the following paragraphs. It does seem, however, that, with some exceptions, the egalitarian holding a subjective theory of the good can support an equal distribution of economic goods and liberty as a practicable means of approaching an equality of satisfactions.

The second problem, the problem of intense preferences, is more difficult. Suppose that A's needs and wants are few and easily satisfied, while B's are many and intense and he suffers deep disappointment at their frustration. And suppose, because of this, that B needs twice as

much income as A to achieve equal satisfactions. In some contexts this may strike us as quite unfair, i.e. equality of goods may seem more just than equality of satisfactions.

A problem like this might lead one to conclude that the only reasonable thing to do is to aim for a certain distribution of goods and leave the satisfactions received as a concern only of the individuals involved. This underlies Rawls' decision in *A Theory of Justice* to formulate principles of justice in terms of the distribution of primary goods rather than of satisfactions. He justifies this as follows:

It may be objected that expectations should not be defined as an index of primary goods anyway but rather as the satisfactions to be expected when plans are executed using these goods. After all it is in the fulfilment of these plans that men gain happiness.... Justice as fairness, however, takes a different view. For it does not look behind the use which persons make of the rights and opportunities available to them in order to measure, much less to maximize, the satisfactions they receive.... it is assumed that members of society are rational persons able to adjust their conceptions of the good to their situation.¹⁰

Rawls' point is that the satisfactions people receive from goods are 'up to them,' a function of their own 'plans of life' which are to an important extent under their voluntary control

I think that Rawls' point has cogency, but I do not think it justifies the strong conclusion that justice should be concerned only with the distribution of goods. (In effect Rawls replaces the primacy of satisfactions with the primacy of goods.) I shall sketch my reasons both for agreeing with Rawls' point and for disagreeing with his conclusion and then I will show the bearing of the result on egalitarianism and the coordination issue.

Let's recall the point that the satisfactions a person gets from a good are determined by such features as his wants, their intensity, how they rank vis-à-vis other wants, and his overall goals. To make this vivid we might note that a person's satisfactions are also influenced by these other features of his psychological 'make-up': his emotional responses; his temperament or basic disposition to be pleased or displeased by things; and his adaptability which involves the willingness to try out new activities, be open to new experiences, put in effort, put up with dissatisfactions and adjust to disappointments. Given this I want to

10 Rawls, 94. Rawls has clarified and reinforced this view in some of his essays that have appeared since *A Theory of Justice*. See 'A Kantian Conception of Equality,' *Cambridge Review*, 96 (1975) 97; 'Fairness to Goodness,' *Philosophical Review*, 84 (1975) 553-4; and 'Reply to Alexander and Musgrave,' *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 88 (1974) 641-3.

argue as follows. Suppose that a person is not afflicted by some special *liability* such as a physical or mental handicap or a social handicap such as being educationally underprivileged, poor or oppressed. And suppose that society has secured an equal distribution of highly convertible goods such as wealth and liberty. In such cases it seems to me a morally sound claim to hold that it is a person's responsibility to coordinate and adjust his preferences with the available goods in a satisfying way. Moreover I think it can be argued that it is part of a person's good to do this, an aspect of his autonomy and self-determination. If this argument is correct, it would not be society's responsibility, in the case I have mentioned, to equalize satisfactions; in fact it would be morally inappropriate, even if possible, for society to do that which ought to be the product of self-determination. Despite the varying intensity of preferences, then, this would give the egalitarian a moral reason (and not just a practical reason) for supporting in these conditions an equal distribution of (highly convertible) goods and, as Rawls says, leaving it up to individuals how best to use them.

This argument for equal goods applies only in the conditions I have mentioned. When people have special handicaps or have undergone social deprivation or oppression, then I think the egalitarian should favor an unequal distribution of goods in order to equalize well-being.¹¹ In other words, the argument distinguishes between two causes of inequality of satisfactions: when such inequality is caused only by the special features of people's psychological make-ups, then equality of goods is in order; but, when the inequality is a function of special liabilities, attributable either to nature or society, then unequal goods are required to remove these. Thus Rawls is partly right in his emphasis on the distribution of goods, but his exclusive concern with this results in an inadequate treatment of the significant liabilities I have mentioned.¹²

11 An obvious application of this point is the justification of preferential treatment to overcome the liabilities caused by discrimination.

12 The point that Rawls' exclusive emphasis on primary good overlooks special physical needs was made by Brian Barry, *The Liberal Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1973) 55-6. My argument extends this criticism to the claim that social liabilities are also overlooked. In a later paper Rawls responds to a criticism of Barry's sort by saying that for the development of principles of justice, he assumes that 'everyone has normal physical needs so that the problem of special health care does not arise,' 'Some Reasons for the Maximin Criterion,' *American Economic Review*, 64 (1974) 142. I suppose he might also assume that the social liabilities I have mentioned don't exist either. This would be equivalent to assuming as the norm for principles of justice the special condi-

I cannot claim to have given a fully developed argument here. In particular the distinction between the two causes of inequality I have mentioned needs more careful probing, and since space and my overall aims do not permit fuller treatment here, I will rest with this sketch.¹³ But suppose the argument or something like it is sound. What does it tell us about the ideal of equal well-being? I think that it represents a move away from the subjective theory of the good. If attempting to adjust one's aims to the circumstances is an element of the good, then it is good even for one who does not want it. Consider further one who fails to some degree in this struggle and is dissatisfied and compare this person with one who has not struggled but has achieved a relatively effortless contentment. Who is better off? (Compare: Who is better off, a pig satisfied or Socrates dissatisfied?) I do not think there is a clear answer. One has contentment which is an element of well-being, while the other has developed and exercised capacities in order to meet a specifically human challenge, which is also an element of well-being. Each has something the other lacks. Well-being is, this suggests, a rather complex concept whose elements may be in opposition. Equality of satisfactions is thus a one-sided interpretation of well-being because it leaves out other elements. Equality of goods, then, in the circumstances I have mentioned is a reasonable compromise between these two elements, giving everyone a chance to attain both the satisfactions and the exercise of responsibility which are each important elements of well-being.¹⁴

tions in which I have held that equality of good is appropriate. But it seems to me to be highly arbitrary to develop principles of justice which overlook these crucial social and physical handicaps, and to say nothing about how society should respond to them.

- 13 I have found very valuable Thomas Scanlon's discussion of the intensity issue in his 'Preference and Urgency.' My conclusions, I think, are similar to his but he rejects the responsibility argument as sufficient. He holds that the argument presupposes an objective criterion of well-being according to which certain interests of persons are more urgent or important than others independent of how they feel about them; what matters is not the intensity but the urgency or importance of their desires. Scanlon's argument thus constitutes another set of reasons for maintaining equality of goods in the circumstances I have mentioned: such equality meets equally the equally important wants of persons, this being a more appropriate specification of equal well-being than equal satisfactions. Space does not permit me to show why I persist in the independent validity of the responsibility argument in the face of Scanlon's point, but I intend to treat this whole set of issues in detail in another paper.
- 14 A recent discussion which casts considerable doubt on the adequacy of subjective theories of the good based on satisfactions is Amartya Sen's 'Utilitarianism

If what I have argued is correct, I would like to draw the following moral. It would be a mistake for the egalitarian to understand equality of well-being exclusively in terms either of goods or of satisfactions. The egalitarian will have to choose between these two specifications of equality in different contexts. Some may take this as showing that egalitarianism is incoherent since it involves conflicting ideals of equality, but I take it as showing only that it is complicated. It is not a fanatical commitment to one simple idea, but a more complex commitment to the ideal of equal well-being which, in the process of being clarified and applied, will require that arguments be given in particular contexts for one way of applying the ideal rather than another – arguments in terms of different theories of the good and of the complexities of human life.

IV. Overall Equality and the Possibility of Trade-Offs

In the section just completed I considered some distributional questions raised by the goods-satisfactions distinction and the subjective theory of the good. In this section I consider another distributional issue, the possibility of what I shall call trade-offs between basic goods of different categories. To make this clearer, let's first note a distinction we can make between *particular* and *overall* equality. A particular equality exists when people have the same amounts of a particular good or satisfaction. Overall equality exists when the particular goods or satisfactions people have 'sum up' or 'balance out' so that people come out equally 'overall'; such equality is compatible with many particular inequalities. For the ideal of equal well-being, it would seem that what is fundamentally important is overall equality, and that particular inequalities would not be objectionable if they balanced out so as to produce overall equality of well-being. In fact some particular inequalities might be required if they were the *only* way to achieve such overall equality.¹⁵

and Welfarism,' *Journal of Philosophy*, 76 (1979) 463-89. Sen criticizes what he calls 'welfarism': 'the judgment of the relative goodness of alternative states of affairs must be based exclusively on, and taken as an increasing function of the respective collection of individual utilities in these states' (468). Welfarism involves the subjective theory of the good.

- 15 We have already seen some cases in which the distinction between particular and overall equality could have been used, e.g. giving those physically or socially deprived more resources than others is a particular inequality meant to promote overall equality. It is often assumed that the egalitarian must require par-

This doctrine of what we might call the 'primacy of overall equality' leads to another distributional problem. Consider the following goods which are part of the liberal theory of well-being; material possessions, individual and political liberty, and self-respect. Let's also add power to this list. The primacy of overall equality implies that unequal distributions of these goods would be justified (or required) if the inequalities compensate for or off-set each other in such a way that overall equality is achieved. For example, those with less liberty might have this balanced by more money, or those with less self-respect might be compensated by more power. But these trade-offs seem quite fanciful, just plain wrong. What, then, should an egalitarian say about this possibility which seems to be allowed by his theory?

In this section I will give some reasons why, contrary to appearances, the egalitarian should not support such trade-offs. I will try to make plausible the claim that the best way to achieve equal well-being is not to permit trade-offs between these goods, but, in general, to secure their equal distribution.¹⁶ The appropriate place for trade-offs, I will suggest, is within certain categories of the goods. The arguments I give here frequently assume an objective theory of the good, for they involve grounds for the liberal goods independent to some extent of people's desires for them. My account thus depends on a fuller defense of such an objective theory.

particular equality for every good. Cf. J.R. Lucas:

We can secure Equality in certain respects between members of certain classes for certain purposes and under certain conditions; but never and necessarily never, Equality in all respects for all men for all purposes and under all conditions. The egalitarian is doomed to a life not only of grumbling and everlasting envy, but of endless and inevitable disappointment.

(*'Against Equality,'* 150)

The rhetorical force of this claim depends I think on assuming that the egalitarian must favor complete particular equality.

- 16 It is possible to approach the issue of equality by distinguishing different types of equality, such as economic, political, social, moral, etc., and treating each of these separately in terms of moral arguments held appropriate for the particular case. In doing this one resists the idea, central to my outlook, of an overall good or well-being of which the goods connected to the particular types of equality are elements; and one resists the idea that those goods should be distributed, at least to some extent, in terms of their effect on the overall good. Part of my aim in this section is to show that the intuitions of the 'separatists' can be accommodated within the 'overall equality' framework I put forward.

1. *Economic Goods and Political Liberty.* Let's focus on these two goods and consider the possibility that overall equality could be produced by counterbalancing inequalities of them. Such a situation is not unimaginable: consider, for example, a society divided into two groups, money-makers who are debarred from political participation, and rulers who do not engage in economic activity. Such a division into artisans and rulers is familiar to us from Plato's *Republic*. One of the things wrong with this situation is that the two goods at issue, economic goods and political participation (or the right to it) are in a certain way incommensurable; they meet quite different fundamental human interests and promote qualitatively different aspects of human well-being. Roughly, economic goods enable us to satisfy our 'personal' preferences¹⁷ while political participation facilitates our need for community. The good life, we might say, requires fair doses of both these goods, and this means that their qualitative differences are more important than any quantitative dimension in accord with which they might be compared or traded off. I don't want to claim, however, that these goods are never commensurable. At levels of severe economic deprivation a sacrifice of political liberty makes sense in return for economic well-being; while at levels of affluence, political participation may be more important than increased economic well-being. In the cases of need and luxury, then, these goods have different degrees of importance and trade-offs make sense. But in the ordinary range of social conditions, they are equally important, satisfying as they do quite different interests. Equal well-being and overall equality will thus best be served in those conditions if these goods are not traded off, but distributed equally.

2. *Economic Goods and Individual Liberty.* Are counterbalancing inequalities here plausible as a way of promoting equal well-being? Again I want to say no, but for a different reason. As background for the argument, let us note that there are two ways of understanding individual liberty. On the *formalistic* account, people are equally free to perform an act if no legal or conventional rules forbid them from doing it. Their equal liberty remains intact even if some cannot do it because they lack an appropriate means, e.g., income. On a *substantive account*, equal liberty requires not only the absence of prohibitive rules but equality of the relevant means, i.e., people have equal liberty only when they are equally able to perform an act.¹⁸ Let us now consider the possibility of

17 Cf. the distinction between personal and external preferences put forth by Ronald Dworkin in *Taking Rights Seriously*, 231-8, 275-6; and 'liberalism,' 134-6

18 I make this distinction roughly, in a way adequate for my purposes but I do not deny it needs to be qualified. Those holding the substantive view may not re-

trade-offs between economic goods and individual liberty according to the substantive definition. The obvious point to make here is that these goods are to a high degree connected, that is the more economic goods one has, the more one can do and therefore the more liberty one has, and vice versa. Liberty and economic goods vary directly, not inversely, with each other. The idea of counterbalancing inequalities in this case is therefore not realistic. Equality of well-being is more likely to be reached if these goods are not traded off in the way contemplated, but are each distributed equally.¹⁹

3. *Power.* It is often assumed that since power is a good the egalitarian must favor its equal distribution.²⁰ But unequal power seems essential for political and social organization; moreover, it may be part of the concept of power that it must be possessed, at any given time, unequally. So the egalitarian is in a spot if he must call for such equality. I am inclined to argue, however, that power is the sort of good which is an element in the well-being of some people but not of others, and depends to a large extent, perhaps completely, on people's desire for it. (I do not consider myself worse off than someone else solely on the ground that he has power I neither have nor want very much.) In this regard I take power to be unlike economic goods and political and individual liberty.²¹ Thus the unequal distribution of power can be compatible with overall equality just as the unequal distribution of skiing equipment need not detract from equal well-being. Of course power, as a matter of fact, tends to be strongly connected with other basic goods, so that while inequality of power may itself be benign, its consequences can be

quire complete equality of means, nor will those holding the formalistic account hold that means are entirely irrelevant. The standard defense of the formalistic account of liberty is Isaiah Berlin's, 'Two Concepts of Liberty,' *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1969), Ch. III. See also Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (South Bend, IN: Gateway Editions 1960) Chapters 1-2. A well-known criticism of Berlin's view is Gerald MacCallum's 'Negative and Positive Freedom,' *Philosophical Review* 76 (1967) 312-34. A sensitive discussion of this issue, defending what I call the substantive conception of liberty, is Richard Norman, 'Does Equality Destroy Liberty,' in Keith Graham, ed., *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982), 83-109.

- 19 If liberty is construed formalistically, then I think trade-offs with economic goods can be rejected on the sort of grounds of incommensurability appealed to for the rejection of trade-offs between economic goods and political liberty.
- 20 Cf. the discussion in J.R. Lucas, 'Against Equality,' 147-9
- 21 Rawls also distinguishes power from these other goods by leaving it off his list of primary goods. He thus denies that power is the sort of good a rational person would want whatever else he wants and this seems to be correct. See Rawls, 'Fairness to Goodness,' fn. 8, 542-3.

highly inegalitarian. For this reason the egalitarian should support institutional means both to weaken these connections and to produce a wider distribution of power.

What about the question of trade-offs, those having more power having less of something else? Since I have argued that more power does not necessarily make a person better off, there may be no inequality of the sort that needs to be balanced off, i.e. there is no problem for which trade-offs are the solution. So while in the case of economic goods and individual and political liberty, trade-offs seemed either undesirable or impossible, here they just seem unnecessary.²²

4. *Self-respect*. I conclude this section with a few remarks about self-respect and then I summarize the argument. Self-respect is a fundamental good for 'when self-respect is lacking we feel our ends are not worth pursuing, and nothing has much value.'²³ Society, however, cannot distribute self-respect itself, for it is a good like satisfaction dependent not only on external conditions, but also on our inner psychological make-up and perhaps to some extent on our own efforts. Society can, however, influence the distribution of what Rawls refers to as the bases of self-respect. What are these bases? Surely the liberal goods we have been discussing – material possessions, individual and political liberty – are among the most important, and equal self-respect is therefore most likely to be achieved if these goods are distributed equally. But this means, further, that possible trade-offs between these goods and self-respect so as to attain overall equality of well-being are unrealistic, i.e. it is unreasonable to think we could compensate less income, for example, with more self-respect, or have less self-respect but more liberty. This is much like the case of trade-offs between economic goods and individual liberty: self-respect varies directly, not inversely, with the other liberal goods, and this makes trade-offs unworkable.

In an egalitarian society the grounds for equal self-respect will also include the public conviction of the equality of all persons. But there is another basis of self-respect that poses a problem. To some extent self-respect depends on the respect and admiration shown us by others in light of our development of particular talents and achievements. But since some will always be more talented or achieve more than others, it seems impossible that this basis be possessed equally and to that extent

22 I have overlooked in this section the fact that not all who want power and for whom it would be a good can have it. So inequality of power can sometimes be an inequality of well-being. This is an instance of the general problem of scarcity which I simply do not treat in this paper.

23 Rawls, 'Reply to Alexander and Musgrave,' 641

equal self-respect seems unattainable. Concerning this problem I simply want to point out a way in which the distinction between particular and overall equality can be useful. Not everyone can develop the same skills and achieve the respect of others in the same way, but a society which both encourages self-development and removes or neutralizes the social and physical obstacles to such development may bring it about that (almost) everyone is good at something which validly²⁴ elicits the admiration and esteem of others. In such a case particular inequalities of self-respect will balance out and help provide part of the basis for overall equality of self-respect.²⁵ I do not, however, want to rest too much on this argument. It is likely that even in the best of circumstances some will not excel in anything or will excel only in activities which have low social prestige. My main point is that this is a case in which particular inequalities may be structured so as to produce or approach overall equality.

In this section I have tried to make plausible²⁶ the view that the egalitarian committed to equal well-being will not want to allow trade-offs among the basic liberal goods, but will instead support an equal distribution of these goods. The doctrine of overall equality is compatible with such equality of goods and does not have the counter-intuitive implications it first seemed to have. At the same time I have suggested that balancing inequalities to achieve overall equality is plausible *within* the categories of self-respect, power, and – as suggested by the discus-

24 The use of the word 'validly' is meant to rule out 'gimmicked' self-respect, as when a person comes to respect a self not worthy of respect because he is misinformed or deceived into thinking some characteristic of his is admirable. All sorts of examples of this abound – see especially Thomas Hill, 'Servility and Self-Respect,' *The Monist*, 57 (1973) 87-104 – and the question of when self-respect is genuine is a difficult one.

25 Consider Lucas's remarks:

Two inequalities are better than one. It is better to have a society in which there are a number of pecking orders, so that a person who comes in low according to one can nevertheless rate highly according to another. ... So long as we have plenty of different inequalities, nobody need be absolutely inferior.
(*Against Equality Again*, 268)

An egalitarian can agree with this though I find Lucas's language insensitive to the difference between real and spurious self-respect referred to in the previous footnote.

26 I say 'make plausible' because I am aware that my arguments need more development, a task incompatible with my overall aim in this paper of exhibiting the different parts of a plausible egalitarian perspective.

sion in the previous section – economic goods. The overall solution of the coordination problem treated in the last two sections is that the egalitarian should support an equal distribution of basic goods except in the case of special physical and social liabilities where the concern for satisfactions instead of goods dictates an unequal distribution. When such liabilities are absent and goods are distributed equally, a person must take responsibility for how he adjusts his plans and aims to achieve a level of satisfaction. This completes the bulk of my discussion of the coordination problem, although there are a few additional remarks in the concluding section.

V. The Structure of Egalitarianism

Berlin says that the egalitarian seeks *absolute equality*, and he understands this as total uniformity. We have seen many reasons to doubt that an egalitarian must seek uniformity, but must he seek absolute equality understood in some other way? To answer this we must consider what could be meant by ‘absolute’ here and I will suggest two claims that might be intended, first that the egalitarian is committed to only one value – equality – and can recognize no others, and second that an egalitarian must support an absolute or exceptionless obligation that people be treated equally, in contrast to a *prima facie* or ‘other things being equal’ obligation. I will argue that both of these claims are false.

Regarding the first claim, it is easy to show that an egalitarian need not be committed to just one value. As we have seen the egalitarian will believe that certain things are good, and he wants goods to be distributed in a way that equalizes well-being. But these things are good independent of their equal distribution, that is they are values the egalitarian adopts in addition to equality. So he is not committed to just one value. We can put this in another way, using some standard philosophical vocabulary, by saying that egalitarianism (strictly: the egalitarian principle) is a theory of the right or of obligation, which needs to be supplemented by a theory of the good. (In this regard it is just like utilitarianism.) Equality may be its only *distributive value*, but it recognizes values other than distributive values, i.e. the goods to be distributed.²⁷

²⁷ Suppose an ‘egalitarian’ were to think that there is nothing of value besides equality, not well-being, not liberty, not self-respect, etc. Finding nothing of

A more plausible interpretation of the claim that egalitarianism is committed to absolute equality is the view that it can admit no distributive values other than equality, and allow no exceptions to this value. In other words, egalitarianism involves an absolute, rather than a prima facie, obligation that people be treated equally. Let me explain how I will use these familiar terms. An obligation to do an act of kind X is absolute if X must be done on every occasion on which it is an alternative; there are no exceptions to absolute obligations. An obligation to do an act of kind X is prima facie if there is always a moral reason for doing acts of kind X, but this reason may be overridden in particular cases when there are stronger moral reasons for not doing X; exceptions, in other words, are possible.²⁸

I do not think that egalitarianism should involve an absolute obligation of equal treatment.²⁹ My reasons for this are simple and general. I feel sure that for any moral principle – except for a vacuous one like ‘Always do what is right’ – it is always possible that particular circumstances occur in which putting it into effect will be seriously wrong from the moral point of view. Morality is too complex, too pluralistic to permit any principle to be taken in an absolute manner. The same is true for the egalitarian principle: cases could arise in which an equal distribution will be, all things considered, morally inappropriate. I therefore think that a plausible egalitarian theory must involve a prima facie rather than an absolute obligation of equal treatment. (The first part of defending egalitarianism is providing arguments for such an obligation.)

value to distribute, he might then be led to the view that equality means nothing but identical or uniform treatment; this would be the only *content* he could give to equal treatment. This may explain how some get to the uniformity view of egalitarianism: they assume that the egalitarian can embrace only one value and needs no ‘independent’ theory of the good.

- 28 I have tried to clarify in more detail the notions of absolute and prima facie obligation, and have distinguished different types of prima facie obligation, in ‘The Obligation to Obey the Law,’ *Social Theory and Practice*, 2 (1972) 67-84.
- 29 I shall not discuss the important question of upon whom the obligation falls. I assume it falls on ‘society’ but it needs to be made clear what this means and what its implications are, and how this obligation accords with the obligations of particular individuals, in both public and private capacities. My overall view is that society needs to provide and maintain an egalitarian ‘basic structure’ within which individuals will be free to act on nonegalitarian reasons. But this needs more clarification than I can give it here, though some of my remarks concerning what I call the ‘morality condition’ below are relevant. For the notion of a ‘basic structure’ see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, sections 2, 11-17, 41-43; and ‘The Basic Structure as Subject,’ *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1977) 159-65.

This conclusion may seem, however, to constitute a fatal weakening of the egalitarian position. An absolute obligation of equal treatment may be too strong, but a *prima facie* one may seem too weak: such an obligation may be easily overridden by opposing moral considerations, so that very little equality, all things considered, is required. But surely an egalitarian must hold that equality is the right outcome quite a lot of the time, if not 'always,' at least 'almost always.' But a *prima facie* obligation cannot guarantee this.

To meet this objection, it must be shown that the egalitarian *prima facie* obligation is strong enough to produce the outcome just mentioned. Let's say that the *strength* of a *prima facie* obligation is a function of how it fares against other obligations, how easily it overrides or is overridden. A weak obligation is easily overridden, a strong one overrides many others. The egalitarian must hold that the obligation to promote equal well-being is a strong one, in fact strong enough to require actual equality in most situations. In the remainder of this section I will show how it is possible for the egalitarian obligation to have such strength.

Let's call the requirement that the egalitarian obligation must as a matter of moral judgment almost always triumph over other distributive moral considerations *the morality condition*. I want to bring out two different ways in which the morality condition might be met. First, it might be held that the relation between the egalitarian obligation and other obligations is that the others come into play only in extreme or unusual conditions. The egalitarian obligation is the only one or the dominant one for the normal range of cases. What I have in mind is similar to a view often expressed about the concept of rights. If one has a right to do something, then one's liberty to do it may not be restricted solely on the grounds that doing so would promote the general good or the general interest. Rights, as Ronald Dworkin has maintained, are trumps people hold against ordinary utilitarian or general welfare considerations.³⁰ Nevertheless, on this view, if the exercise of a right would have extremely bad consequences, then it may be restricted. But this justification for restriction is applicable only in extreme cases, and the competing moral considerations override the right only in such cases. If such a view could be made out for the egalitarian obligation, then we could express the content of the obligation by saying that people have a *right to equality*. I shall call this way of meeting the morality condition the *rights solution*.

The second way of meeting the morality condition involves allowing other distributive considerations to have moral force in ordinary cir-

30 Cf. Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*, xi.

cumstances, but holds that considerations of equality have a strong kind of priority with regard to these other considerations. I have in mind here something akin to what Rawls means when he speaks in one essay of the 'absolute weight' of justice in regard to utility, or when he says that his principle of equal liberty has lexical priority over the difference principle.³¹ My idea is that the establishment of an egalitarian pattern or 'basic structure' is the dominant moral consideration and other moral considerations are permitted to play a role only in ways that are compatible with this pattern and do not upset it. Suppose, for example, that people with achievements and talents receive rewards or recognition it is held that they deserve. This will be acceptable only if such rewards do not upset the overall structure of equality.³² As I suggested in discussing self-respect this may be possible if there are competing inequalities of reward so that everyone benefits to some degree. In such a case, then, other considerations are admitted as genuinely moral, and relevant in normal cases, but they have a kind of second-class citizenship and are allowed to play a role only in cooperation with equality. Since other moral considerations are not cancelled but contained here, I will call this second way of meeting the morality condition the *containment solution*.

I want to suggest a second condition – in addition to the morality condition – which I believe the egalitarian obligation should meet. This is the requirement that a good deal of equality not only be right as a matter of moral judgment, but that it be to a large degree practically realizable. I shall call this the *reality condition*. To make this clearer, let us suppose it has been successfully argued that there is a prima facie obligation of equal treatment of the strength implied by the morality condition. But suppose it is impossible to meet the obligation to any great extent; the facts of nature and human nature makes a great deal of equality impossible. In such a case the obligation is not overridden but, I shall say, *suspended* by necessity. We admit certain inequalities as necessary inequalities and strive for what we sadly agree is only second best. The reality condition requires that the amount of necessary in-

31 The idea of the 'absolute weight' of justice in regard to utility is found in 'Legal Obligation and the Duty of Fair Play,' in S. Hook, ed., *Law and Philosophy* (New York: New York University Press 1964) 13-14. For the notion of lexical priority see *A Theory of Justice*, sections 8, 14, 46, 82.

32 For a discussion of the sort of desert considerations which may be containable within an egalitarian structure, see Joel Feinberg, 'Justice and Personal Desert,' in *Doing and Deserving* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1970), Ch. 4.

qualities be small or, if there are many such inequalities, that they be unimportant ones.³³

A full discussion of the reality condition would raise difficult issues about the relations between moral judgments and empirical facts. On one hand, moral judgments have some independence of the facts so that an outcome may be right even though it cannot be brought about; on the other hand, a moral theory totally divorced from the possible is a utopia which, though perhaps intrinsically appealing, can provide little guidance for policy decisions in the real world. I cannot go in detail into the question of the relation between facts and moral judgments here, so my defense of the reality condition is somewhat ad hoc: I am interested in developing and defending a theory of justice which is not only theoretically appealing but has a chance of being satisfied in practice, something one can work for as well as think about, and has implications for current and forthcoming social controversies. The reality condition is suggested by this aim.³⁴

An egalitarian theory which meets the morality and reality conditions has a certain structure. It involves a prima facie obligation to promote and maintain equal well-being; it describes the role other moral considerations are permitted to play within a basic egalitarian framework; and it delineates the special conditions in which the obligation can be overridden or suspended. The prima facie obligation is strong enough so that the resulting theory is genuinely egalitarian, but it is not so strong that the theory becomes implausible. In other words, the resulting theory expresses the dominance of the value of equality in social life, but it does not embrace the 'absolute' or monolithic equality Berlin envisages, and it makes room for the complexity of moral deliberation.

33 For a discussion of necessary inequalities see H. Bedau, 'Radical Egalitarianism,' 175-6.

34 If a claim of necessity can overcome or suspend a right, then the reality condition could be seen as a special case of the rights solution of the morality condition; alternatively, it is a solution with respect to necessity analogous to the rights solution with respect to competing moral considerations.

VI. Equality, Pareto Improvements, and Expensive Needs

If the moral structure described in the last section were filled in with the account of well-being defended in previous sections, we would have a fairly complete formulation of egalitarianism.³⁵ There are, however, two further problems about the meaning of 'maximum equal well-being' which need to be addressed. The first might be called the problem of 'pareto improvements.' Suppose it is possible to move from a condition of equality to one in which at least one person is better off and the rest remain the same (and no redistribution to restore equality at a higher level is possible). Or suppose we can move from equality to a condition involving inequality in which *everyone* is better off (and, again, no egalitarian redistribution is possible). These are both pareto improvements on equality. Should an egalitarian favor or oppose them? If he favors them, he seems to allow inequalities, but opposition in the name of equality, seems to mean a gratuitous sacrifice of well-being. Egalitarianism seems to imply opposing the pareto improvement, but that seems to be the morally wrong outcome.

Let me try to put the problem in more theoretical terms before dealing with it. The egalitarian ideal of maximum equal well-being expresses two moral concerns or values – one is a (comparative) concern that people do equally well, that their relations be characterized by equality, the other is a (non-comparative) concern for people's well-being, a wish that they do as well as they can. The egalitarian ideal thus involves two 'strands,' 'equal well-being' or the *equality strand*, and 'the maximum well-being each person is capable of' or the *humanitarian strand*. The ideal puts these together by qualifying the humanitarian strand in light of the equality strand and the result can be put as follows: given available resources, *the highest possible well-being each person is capable of compatible with a similar well-being for others*. This synthesis of the two strands leads to the pareto improvement problem in cases in which the fulfilment of the equality strand severely restricts the humanitarian strand, i.e. equal well-being seems to require the needless sacrifice of

35 The formulation is somewhat limited in scope because of two assumptions I have implicitly made. First, I have taken as my unit a single society, rather than the whole world; and secondly, I have tried to aim at picturing an egalitarian society at a single instant and have not considered what equality requires over time, especially in regard to future generations. The wider perspective involves both more people and fewer resources per capita and thus needs to be considered for a fully adequate treatment of the subject.

higher well-being for some, or even for all. In effect, while the synthesis gives the equality strand dominance, its plausibility is based on the assumption that each strand can be fulfilled to a high degree compatible with the other strand being equally fulfilled. The pareto improvement problem casts doubt on this. There are three phenomena which pose the problem most acutely: the existence of mentally or physically handicapped people, differences among ordinary person's in 'natural' capacities for well-being, and the possibility that social inequalities might benefit everyone. I will examine each of these in turn.

The existence of persons who are mentally or physically handicapped in such a way that their capacity for well-being is less than that of the ordinary non-deprived person raises the pareto improvement problem vividly. Suppose that such persons are brought up to their maximum level. The egalitarian ideal seems to require that no one else should be permitted to attain higher levels of well-being, i.e. that no one may reach a level of well-being higher than that attainable by a person with the lowest capacity for well-being. This is an unwelcome and inhumane conclusion. This is a case in which the egalitarian 'synthesis' I mentioned above falls apart. Instead of the two strands each contributing a fair amount to the outcome, the equality strand almost totally defeats the humanitarian strand. The egalitarian must admit here, I think, that his major idea does not work out right and he should conclude that, once the handicapped have been brought up to their maximum level, ordinary people may justifiably do better, i.e. he should admit the justifiability of this pareto improvement on equality. Suppose, however, that the egalitarian admits this? What implications does this have for the rest of his view? It might be thought that it is a fatal admission, that it will lead, in all consistency, to pareto and other sorts of departures from equality in so many other cases that egalitarianism has in effect been given up. I will show that this is not so, that the admission is a very limited and minor one, applicable only to this particular case. After showing that the admission does not have fatal implications, I will return to this case – the handicapped and the average – and put it in its proper light.

The obvious generalization from the case of the handicapped is this: differences in capacity for well-being exist not only between the average and the handicapped, but among normal persons as well. Allowing normal persons to do better than the handicapped seems to imply that normal persons with higher capacities should do better than those with lower capacities, once the latter have attained their maximum level. This suggests the following version of what Rawls calls the 'lexical difference principle' to govern differences in 'natural' capacities for well-being: first, maximize the well-being of persons with the lowest capaci-

ty; then, those with the next lowest, etc.³⁶ It might be thought that the egalitarian, admitting inequalities in regard to the handicapped and the average, must also admit them here and must accept this principle rather than a more egalitarian one. But this is not so. People have different capacities for well-being largely because they have different capacities for what I have called 'satisfactions.' I argued in section III, however, that the appropriate content of 'equal well-being' in the absence of special physical and social liabilities is *equality of goods*, leaving the satisfactions people receive as their responsibility. In fact, I argued that part of their well-being is constituted by dealing with the challenge of managing their resources in a satisfying and beneficial way. This means, then, that goods are not to be distributed in terms of intensity of preference or capacity for satisfactions. But since differences in capacity for well-being are a function of such differences in intensity and satisfactions, it means also that goods should not be distributed in accord with the lexical difference principle either. Instead goods are, for the egalitarian, to be distributed equally.

The point just made could be put slightly differently by saying that the arguments in section III concerning satisfactions and responsibility show in effect that the morally relevant capacities for well-being of average persons are, for all practical purposes, equal. I think this point could be argued more directly. It is difficult to see what facts would be appealed to in order to defend the claim of differential capacities for well-being – the fact that some have greater talents or are more temperamentally 'optimistic' than others won't be sufficient. But I cannot pursue this here; I will simply point out that if the argument is correct and the capacities for well-being of average persons are, in effect, equal, this means that there is *no need* for the lexical principle as an alternative to straight equality, and there is no problem-causing pareto departure from equality to consider. In other words, considering ordinary persons in light of their natural capacities for well-being, equal distribution poses no pareto improvement problem.

I turn now to social inequalities. It is often claimed that social inequalities provide incentives which draw out the efforts of people in a way which makes everyone better off, better off than they would be under conditions of equality. Given this 'incentive principle,' some

36 Rawls discusses the lexical difference principle in *A Theory of Justice*, 82-3. My version differs from his in that his is meant to cover both social inequalities and inequalities due to natural characteristics, while mine is intended to cover only the latter. The possibility of such a principle for social inequalities is discussed, and rejected below. I am indebted to Rolf Sartorius for suggesting the objections to my view that this section attempts to deal with.

social inequalities would be pareto improvements on equality. What should the egalitarian say here? I think that the egalitarian must argue against the incentive principle and hold that little, if any, social inequality is necessary or justified. Thus if social conditions are such that social inequalities would make everyone better off, the egalitarian view would be that the conditions which set the background for this possibility can and thus should be altered, and that the inequalities should not be allowed.

But how can the 'incentive principle' be attacked? Before addressing this question directly, let's note the use of the principle in Rawls' theory of justice. According to the difference principle, inequalities are justified when and only when they maximize the position of those who are worst off. While the difference principle does not justify inequalities per se, it lays down conditions under which they would be justified. Rawls clearly believes that these conditions hold. He says that there are inequalities in the basic structure of society which are 'especially deep,' 'pervasive' and 'presumably inevitable.'³⁷ He holds that better prospects for entrepreneurs may act as incentives to economic efficiency and innovation, with the resulting material benefits spreading 'throughout the system and to the least advantaged.' While Rawls says that he will 'not consider how far these things are true,'³⁸ his assumption that they are true is deeply embedded in his perspective and influences the way he treats many issues. But he never really probes the assumption or gives significant argument for it. In effect he simply takes society stratified along economic lines as a given and proposes the difference principle to modify and justify the inequalities so contained. It seems to me, however, that a theory of justice which relies so heavily on the claim of the necessity and benevolence of social inequalities must give that claim careful and substantial support.

I cannot in this paper subject the principle to a thorough criticism but I'll suggest several lines of attack. It seems to me that the incentive principle as commonly understood involves three claims:

- (a) People will develop socially beneficial skills only if they are rewarded for doing so.
- (b) The needed rewards must be economic ones.

37 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 7

38 *Ibid.*, 78

- (c) The resulting reward structure must be an inegalitarian one.

It may be that these three claims are true of a capitalist economy and of the sorts of persons socialized in such an economy. But a society does not necessarily have to be organized along capitalist lines. An egalitarian's typical preference for socialism can thus be seen as reflecting the belief that in such an economy the incentive principle and the ensuing inequalities it brings out does not apply. But, it might be said, capitalist economies are the best and most efficient and make everyone better off than they would be under an egalitarian socialist system. Much can be said for and much against this. The point, though, is that the defense of the incentive principle in this way turns into a defense of capitalism as the best economic system. And it certainly cannot be said that the evidence is all in on that matter.

Let us then look at the incentive principle as a claim about 'human nature' independent of economic systems. The first part of the principle is very plausible. It is probably essential that people in general be rewarded for the development of talents, at least in the form of recognition and praise. Some social 'validation' of one's merits may indeed be necessary for the development of self-respect and self-worth. But it is a far cry from this to hold that talents must receive economic rewards. People can be motivated to develop talents in many ways, not only for the obvious goods of prestige, power and fame, but to achieve the admiration and respect of friends, relatives, and co-workers. And of course there are intrinsically rewarding occupations in which people are moved to develop skills for their own sakes. How far work in general can be restructured so as to make this tendency more widespread is another big question, and most egalitarians would hold that improvements are possible in this direction.

It might be countered, however, that if other rewards are substituted for economic ones, inequality will still result, an inequality of prestige or power, instead of income or wealth.³⁹ In other words, even if part (b) of the incentive principles can be shown to be false, part (c) may still hold: an inegalitarian reward structure of *some sort* is necessary. Against this I shall simply refer to a possibility raised earlier in the discussion of self-respect, that unequal rewards in the distribution of recognition may be compatible with an overall equality of well-being. Suppose A develops a talent to a greater extent than B. He will therefore receive more recogni-

39 See J.R. Lucas, 'Against Equality,' 148-9.

tion, more 'psychic income' for that talent than B. But B may receive more recognition than A for the development of some other talent. Both can then receive the recognition they require for the motivation to develop important skills without any inequality of overall well-being. But it might be said that overall inequalities of prestige attached to different occupations must emerge. Suppose this were so in a society in which a) there is a public conviction of the equality of all persons, b) income and liberty are equal, and c) all are able to develop worthwhile talents. In such a context inequalities in prestige or power may amount to very little, if any inequality of well-being.

My point then, is that even if part (a) of the incentive principle is correct – and in some 'minimal' sense I am inclined to accept it – parts (b) and (c) do not follow, and (c) even if correct may be correct in a sense not incompatible with the egalitarian idea. Of course a lot more needs to be said to support these points. But I believe enough has been said to show that the incentive principle cannot be taken for granted and the desirability of socially-based pareto improvements on equality can be questioned.

I return now to the case of the handicapped and the ordinary. We see now that the admission of a pareto improvement on equality in this case does not require giving up equality among ordinary persons, nor does it imply the justification of social inequalities. It is in fact a special case in which the obligation of equal treatment is overridden by humanitarian considerations (the humanitarian strand overrides the equality strand of the egalitarian ideal here, we might say). I find such an exception unimportant, of a kind allowed by the morality condition mentioned in the previous section. The need for the exception arises solely because of the *profound* and *physically-based* differences in capacity for well-being involved. But these features, I have argued, are confined to this case.

At the beginning of this section I said that I would address two problems: the second problem may be called the problem of very expensive needs. Consider the handicapped again. I have already argued (pp. 33-5, 37) that when an equal distribution of goods would not make the same contribution for the well-being of ordinary and handicapped persons, an unequal distribution in favor of the handicapped is favored on egalitarian grounds; in such a case, equality of goods gives way, I said to the promotion of equality of satisfactions. But suppose that the amount of resources needed to bring the handicapped to their maximum level is so high that providing it means that normal persons must achieve levels of well-being far below what they are capable of. In other words, scarce resources flow so heavily to the handicapped that comparatively little is left for the rest. Similar issues could arise in the provision of expensive

exotic medical technology.⁴⁰ Should an egalitarian support such a provision for expensive needs? I believe that equality indeed requires such a provision, but that there is a point at which the sacrifice required of others outweighs the *prima facie* obligation of equal well-being; in effect, considerations of utility or welfare override equality here, although the exact point of overriding would have to be determined separately for each case. I think once again, however, that this is the sort of exception to equality permitted by the morality condition. Special people and special needs confront the egalitarian (and other moral theorists) with special problems, but they do not defeat the overall theory and its adequacy for typical cases. Such, at least, has been the argument of this section.

I have tried in this paper to do a number of things: to clarify the ideal of maximum equal well-being, to show what implications it has for the distribution of basic goods, to explicate the moral structure of a non-absolutist egalitarian theory, and to achieve, as a result, a clear and initially appealing version of egalitarianism. Along the way, I hope to have laid to well-deserved rest the uniformity conception of equality and to have shown that egalitarianism need not be the simplistic, monolithic view it is sometimes taken to be, but is both more complex and sensible and has usually overlooked argumentative resources available to it. I have, of course, provided substantive arguments neither for a strong *prima facie* obligation of equal treatment, nor against the objections that are typically brought against egalitarianism on ground of desert, necessity, efficiency and rights. But I hope that my discussion sets the stage for a fruitful consideration of these issues, unimpeded both by confusions as to what egalitarianism is and by facile arguments directed only at misconceptions of it.⁴¹

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40 Note that in both these cases the expensive need is not a function of specially intense preferences, which I have argued, do not require special moral treatment.

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