Prioritarianism and Welfare Reductions

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ABSTRACT   *Derek Parfit has argued that egalitarianism is exposed to a levelling down objection because it implies, implausibly, that a change, which consists only in the better-off sinking to the level of the worse-off, is in one respect better, though it is better for nobody. He claims that, in contrast, the prioritarian view that benefits to the worse-off have greater moral weight escapes this objection. This article contends, first, that prioritarianism is equally affected by the levelling down objection as is egalitarianism, but that this objection lacks force. Secondly, prioritarianism is less plausible than egalitarianism because it implies that lowering the level of equality by diffusing a quantity of welfare equally over as many recipients as possible is for the better all things considered, and that the outcome of such welfare diffusion would still be better in one respect, even if the quantity of welfare was radically reduced.*

1. Preliminaries

Derek Parfit has famously contended that egalitarianism is exposed to a *levelling down objection*, LDO.[1] More precisely, he contends that *teleological* egalitarianism is exposed to this objection, not deontological egalitarianism.[2] Roughly speaking, both are concerned with unjust or unfair inequalities (in respect of welfare), but deontological egalitarianism takes it that injustice involve wrong-doing, whereas teleological egalitarianism is broader in that it also covers 'natural' injustice.[3] For instance, according to teleological but not deontological egalitarianism, it is unjust or unfair that some have congenital handicaps that make them lead lives that are worse than the lives of most of us. It is teleological egalitarianism that I shall here discuss (and also what I mean by 'egalitarianism', unless otherwise indicated).

LDO is to the effect that egalitarianism implies, implausibly, that a change, which consists in the welfare level of the better-off sinking towards the level of the worse-off, is *in one respect* better, though it is better for nobody (and worse for some). It is better in that there is less inequality, and, from the egalitarianism standpoint, unjust inequality is bad in itself.[4] The outcome may not be better *all things considered*, since the loss of benefits may outweigh the gain in respect of equality. Egalitarianism could be taken to consist of two principles: (a) a *principle of equality* to the effect that it is in itself bad if some are unjustly worse off than others, and (b) a *principle of utility or beneficence* to the effect that it is better if individuals are better rather than worse off, or have more benefits rather than fewer. The principle of equality implies that the levelled-down outcome is better because the levelling down has reduced the original inequality, but it is bad according to the principle of utility, since somebody is worse off (and nobody is better off).

Parfit maintains that in contrast to egalitarianism, *the priority view or prioritarianism* — the view that 'it is morally more important to benefit the people who are worse off'[5] — escapes this objection. There are, however, two reasons why this formulation is unsuitable for our purposes because it uses the verb 'to benefit'. First, just as in the case of egalitarianism, a distinction could be drawn between deontological and teleological prioritarianism. We are concerned with teleological prioritarianism, since we are interested in the prioritarian counterpart to teleological egalitarianism, but the use of the verb 'to benefit' might make it seem that prioritarianism has to do with the moral importance of *acts* of benefiting, which might be the concern of deontological prioritarianism, but not of teleological prioritarianism which is about the moral value of *outcomes*.

Secondly, and more importantly, the notion of a person being benefited is comparative: those who are benefited are made better off than they would otherwise have been. In contrast, the notion of having *a* benefit is not comparative if it is understood, as I intend it, as having something that is intrinsically good for you (like pleasure). It might be objected that if you have a benefit, you are better off than you would be without it; so, the notion of having a benefit is implicitly comparative or relative. As will emerge in Section 3, however, this is not always true on a view according to which being brought into existence to lead a life with a surplus of benefits is not to be benefited. According to this view, you have been benefited by being put into a state in which you have benefits only if you would have existed even if you had not been put into this state.

For these reasons, I think that (teleological) prioritarianism should be phrased in terms of the notion of having a benefit: the moral importance, value or weight of having a benefit to an outcome is determined not only by the size of the benefit, but also by the welfare level of the recipient of it, so that the lower the level of the recipient, the greater the moral importance or weight of the benefit.[6] It should be stressed that what is in question here is the *absolute* welfare level, not the welfare level of the recipient relative to others, as egalitarians emphasize.[7] Prioritarianism can then be understood as claiming:

> (P) The intrinsic moral value of one outcome is greater than that of another outcome if and only if its total sum of weighted benefits is greater, where this sum is determined by two factors: (a) the sum of benefits in the outcome, and (b) the average moral weight of these benefits, as determined by the size of these benefits and the absolute welfare level of their recipients.

It could be held against prioritarianism that it is implausible to reject the moral relevance of the relative positions of recipients. Suppose that we know about a universe that it contains at least one individual, X, who is absolutely badly off, without there being anything to justify this, such as the individual deserving or having chosen to be so. We do not know whether this universe contains any other individuals. We do know, however, that if it contains other individuals, they cannot be made better off; only X could be made better off. We are asked to determine how strong a moral reason there is to raise X to a certain level, L.

When we have settled the strength of this reason, we are asked to consider two alternative scenarios in which we find out that there are other individuals in the universe. (1) We find that these other individuals are significantly above the L-level, though there is not anything justifying their being better off than X. (2) We find out that these other

individuals are significantly below L, perhaps at the level X is before being benefited, and that there is not anything justifying X's being better off than they are. Many, including myself, have the intuition that if (1) is true, they should regard the moral reason to raise X (at least) to L as stronger than they initially thought. On the other hand, if (2) is true, their intuition is that the moral reason to lift X to L is weaker than they initially thought. This is because in (1) reasons of justice or fairness support the lift of X to (at least) L, whereas in (2) they counteract this boost. In contrast, if (3) we find that this universe contains no other individuals, the intuition is that the originally perceived strength of the reason to raise X to L would not change. Egalitarianism supports these intuitions, but prioritarianism does not. On the prioritarian view it would not make any difference to the reason to benefit X whether (1), (2) or (3) is true, since this does not affect the absolute level of X. This strikes me as counter-intuitive.

However, I shall not press this objection against prioritarianism. I bring it up because it turns on the prioritarian neglect of the moral significance of the position of a recipient relative to other individuals (as in a kind of case that I shall later discuss because it is of importance for my argument). There is a related problem that I shall also set aside. It does not concern *inter*-personal relativity, relations between the welfare levels of *different* individuals, but *intra*-personal relativity, relations between the welfare levels of the *same* individuals at different times of their existence. It might be asked whether prioritarians are committed to assigning greater weight to benefits received by individuals at times when they are worse off than at times when they are better off.[8] Analogously, it might be asked whether egalitarians are committed to rectifying intra-personal inequalities of welfare distribution by locating benefits at times when recipients are worse rather than better off. Egalitarians could reply that, according to common-sense morality, justice is confined to inter-personal relations, so intra-personal inequalities cannot be unjust. The intra-personal distribution of welfare is a matter of autonomous choice rather than of moral concern. This common-sense view could be challenged, as it is by Parfit,[9] but I shall here take it for granted. In order not to be unfair to prioritarians, I shall also grant that they might be able to defend an analogous view, namely the view that being a *moral* weight, the prioritarian weight does not apply to intra-personal distributions.

The objective of this article is instead to argue, in opposition to Parfit, that priori-tarianism is also vulnerable to LDO — and, indeed, to related, more serious objections that egalitarianism avoids. I grant that egalitarianism is exposed to LDO, but I do not regard this objection as serious. I think that egalitarians should simply deny that, in general, there is anything counter-intuitive about an outcome being better in one respect, though it is not better for anyone. This is a natural corollary of the postulation of *impersonal* values, values that are not values *for* anybody. It is good *for* somebody e.g. to experience pleasure, so pleasure is a personal value. But to feel as much pleasure as other individuals is not necessarily good for anyone though, when this is just, it is something (morally) good about an outcome, according to egalitarianism. When it is required by justice, equality is a (morally) good way of distributing things that are of personal value. Similarly, for those who believe that we can be more or less deserving: it is impersonally good that people enjoy the amount of personal values — pleasure, etc. — that they deserve. This outcome would be less impersonally good if these people did not deserve the personal values that they enjoy, though it would contain as much personal value.[10]

2. Prioritarianism, Levelling Down and Welfare Diffusion

Now, as I have argued elsewhere,[11] prioritarianism is also committed to the existence of an impersonal value. Prioritarianism is committed to an impersonal value because it claims that an outcome is (morally) better if a benefit is bestowed upon somebody who is worse off rather than upon somebody who is better off. This outcome is not better *for* somebody (the worse-off) than the other outcome would be for someone else (the better-off), since the benefit, being the same, is as good *for* one as for the other. Hence, the outcome in which the worse-off individual gets the benefit is impersonally better.

Imagine that the better-off are levelled down to the worse-off, i.e. that the better-off lose benefits so that their welfare level becomes closer to the level of the worse-off. This implies, on prioritarianism, that the average moral value of their remaining benefits — and, consequently, the remaining benefits of the whole outcome — will increase because benefits at higher levels, with lower moral value, have been removed. My claim is that, on prioritarianism, this increase in average moral value means that the outcome is in one respect better.[12] Hence, prioritarianism is exposed to LDO. Like egalitarianism, prioritarianism need not imply that the levelled-down outcome is ever better all things considered, since in respect of another factor, the sum of benefits, i.e. (a) of (P), the outcome is worse, and this respect may always outweigh the respect in which the outcome is better.

Parfit, however, thinks that prioritarianism avoids this objection because prioritarians 'are more concerned for people the worse off these people are . . . it makes no difference . . . whether there are other people who are better off'.[13] It is true that 'it makes no difference' to the prioritarian concern for *the worse-off* whether, or to what extent, there are other people who are better off, but it does not follow that prioritarianism is not exposed to LDO. This is because there is *another* respect in which levelling down is better, according to prioritarianism — a respect which 'makes no difference', according to either egalitarianism or utilitarianism.[14] This is the higher average weight of benefits.

To see that prioritarianism implies that levelling down makes the outcome better in respect of higher average weight of benefits, it is helpful to start by looking at outcomes in which the sum of benefits is constant, say, 100 units,[15] and it is never the case that any recipient gets a different number of units than anyone else.[16] It is just the number of recipients that varies in the *Series*: in the first outcome, 1:100, one individual enjoys all the 100 units, in the second, 2:50, two individuals each have 50 units, in third, 4:25, four individuals each have 25 units . . . and in the final one, 100:1, 100 individuals each have one unit. According to both egalitarianism and utilitarianism, all outcomes in the Series are equally good, all things considered. But according to prioritarianism, the first one, 1:100, is worse than the rest, the final one, 100:1, is the best, and the outcomes in-between are increasingly better than the first, all things considered.[17] The final outcome is the best because each unit of welfare is received by someone who would, without it, be at the zero level; so each unit has the maximal moral weight or value it could have in the Series. By contrast, in the first outcome some units go to someone who would be at a very high level without them, e.g. at the level of having 99 or 98 units, so these units would have a comparatively low moral value. In other words, the average moral or prioritarian weight of welfare units is highest in the outcome 100:1, and lowest in the outcome 1:100. That is why the former is, all things considered, the best outcome and the latter the worst outcome, according to prioritarianism.

One might put this by saying that prioritarianism implies *the desirability of welfare diffusion*, DWD: it is better all things considered if a quantity of welfare is diffused as much as possible, i.e. distributed over as many recipients as possible, so that each recipient gets a minimal benefit. By contrast, utilitarianism and egalitarianism are indifferent with respect to whether a welfare quantity is diffused over many, or concentrated to a few recipients (according to egalitarianism this only holds as long as there is just equality of distribution).

It might be objected that prioritarians need not apply their doctrine to outcomes involving different number of individuals, as the outcomes in the Series do. This might be because it is thought that such an application presupposes that prioritarians are committed to the view that individuals can be benefited by beginning to exist — e.g. the 99 extra individuals who exist in 100:1 being benefited by the fact that this outcome exist in place of the outcome 1:100 — and that prioritarians are not committed to this view, *the value of beginning to exist*, VBE.

Now, it is true that prioritarians are not committed to VBE, but false that applying prioritarianism to the Series presupposes VBE. Note that the outcome 100:1 could have come about in other ways than by individuals being brought into existence, e.g. by transferring benefits from one individual at the level of 100 to 99 *pre-existent* individuals at the zero level, the 1:100 + 99:0 outcome. Even if they do not accept VBE, prioritarians must admit that, if it arises in this way, their view applies to the outcome 100:1. But this outcome is *the same*, irrespective of how it arises, and its sum of weighted benefits is clearly greater than that of 1:100, since the average weight of benefits is higher, and the sum of benefits is the same. It might be that formulations of prioritarianism in terms of the comparative notion of benefiting, instead of the non-comparative notion of having a benefit, creates the mistaken impression that an application of prioritarianism to different number outcomes like those in the Series presupposes VBE.

To see that the prioritarian commitment to the view that 100:1 is better all things considered than 1:100, note that the weighted sum of benefits of 1:100 + 99:0 is the same as that of 1:100, since the 99:0 add nothing to the former sum. So, according to prioritarianism, these outcomes are of equal value (whereas, according to egalitarianism, 1:100 + 99:0 is worse, since it involves an inequality which we could assume to be unfair). Therefore, whether or not the 99 individuals exist, and we have a same number or a different number comparison with 100:1, is irrelevant to a prioritarian assessment of the outcome value. This is because it is not the relative position of the one at 100 to other existing individuals that matters for this assessment; as already remarked, it is the absolute level of welfare of the recipients of benefits that matters. Consequently, we could make a same number comparison between the outcomes 100:1 and 1:100 + 99:0, concluding that, on prioritarianism 100:1 is better all things considered; then compare 1:100 + 99:0 to 1:100, concluding that on prioritarianism they are of equal value, since the existence of individuals who have no benefits makes no difference on this view. Hence, 100:1 is better all told than 1:100, according to prioritarianism. A different number comparison would still be involved — namely, the comparison between 1:100 + 99:0 and 1:100 — but it could not plausibly be claimed that this comparison relies upon VBE.

Since 100:1 is better than 1:100 all things considered, there must be some respect in which it is better. To repeat, this is that the average moral value of units of welfare is higher, since the recipients of these units in 100:1 are comparatively badly off. Contrast

the reason why 100:1 is better than 1:100 with the reason why 2:100 is better than 1:100. In the latter case the reason is that sum of benefits is greater. Both 100:1 and 2:100 are better than 1:100 because their sums of weighted benefits are greater than it is in 1:100, but as we have seen there are two factors determining this sum, and 100:1 is better because of one — the higher average weight — and 2:100 is better because of the other, the greater sum of benefits. Reference to these factors describes more precisely why these outcomes are better than 1:100.

100:1 will continue to be better than 1:100 in the same respect even if the number of recipients of a single unit of welfare in 100:1 is reduced from 100 individuals to 99 or 98 individuals. The total sum of welfare would be slightly smaller in these outcomes, the 99:1 and the 98:1 outcomes, than in the Series, but prioritarians would surely still judge the 99:1 and 98:1 outcomes to be better all things considered than the first outcome, 1:100. This is because the decrease in respect of total sum of welfare is reasonably outweighed by the much higher average moral or prioritarian weight of units of welfare in the 99:1 and 98:1 outcomes. If this increase in average prioritarian weight were not enough to outweigh the loss of one unit or two units, the prioritarian weighting of benefits would have to be so small that a worse-off Leslie must be very much worse off than a better-off Richie in order to justify giving him two benefits rather than Richie one.

However, if we gradually decrease the sum of welfare and the number of recipients in the outcome 100:1, we shall eventually reach a point at which, on prioritarianism, the outcome is no longer better all things considered. But it is nevertheless better in the same one respect, the respect of average moral value of units of welfare. Moreover, it will continue to be better in this respect even when we arrive at the outcome 1:1, in which there remains only one recipient with one unit. We might imagine that this individual is identical to the one who in 1:100 had 100 units. This brings out that prioritarianism implies that reducing someone's level of welfare makes the outcome better in one respect. Similarly, if there is a change from everyone's being equally well off at a higher level to them being equally well off at a lower, prioritarianism implies that this change is in one respect for the better, since the average moral weight of benefits goes up. These consequences — which are obviously not consequences of egalitarianism — are quite unappealing. They seem much more unappealing than the consequence that the levelled down outcome is in one respect better which, I have argued, is a consequence that prioritarianism has in common with egalitarianism.

These doctrines do not differ, then, as regards exposure to LDO. The essential difference between prioritarianism and egalitarianism (of the sort I favour; see Section 3) is simply that, while prioritarianism weights benefits in proportion to the absolute welfare level of the recipients, egalitarianism weights them in proportion to the welfare level of the recipients relative to others. Levelling down makes the worse-off less worse off relative to others. That is the respect in which it is better, according to egalitarianism. But it also lowers the absolute welfare level of the better-off and, thereby, increases the average prioritarian weight of their welfare units. Since the average prioritarian weight of the welfare units of the worse-off is constant, it follows that the average prioritarian weight of the units of the whole outcome increases. This is the respect in which levelling down makes the outcome better, according to prioritarianism.

It is easy to overlook this point because it is natural to assume — as Parfit seems to do in a remark quoted earlier — that if levelling down is better in some respect, this must be a respect which has to do with the position of the worse-off because it cannot

plausibly have to do with the fact that the position of the better-off gets worse: 'If the better off suffer some misfortune, so that they become as badly off as anyone else, we do not think this is in any way a change for the better'.[18] But this is precisely what prioritarianism implies. This implication may also be masked by the unfortunate ambiguity of 'benefit' noted above. Parfit's formulation of prioritarianism concerns the comparative notion of benefiting, so it might seem evident that prioritarianism cannot imply that there is anything good about the change that the better-off undergo, since they are not benefited. But on teleological prioritarianism it is the non-comparative notion of having a benefit that is pertinent, and the better-off do have benefits.

In reply to my objection that prioritarianism is vulnerable to LDO, Nils Holtug draws a parallel between the average prioritarian weight and the total utilitarian's attitude to increases in average welfare.[19] However, this parallel fails because total utilitarians are not committed to there being anything better about outcomes in which the average level goes up, but the total welfare sum is constant or decreases while, as remarked, prioritarians *are* committed to there being something better about outcomes in which the average prioritarian weight goes up, but the total welfare sum is constant or decreases. This follows from the fact that prioritarians are committed to, for example, outcomes like 100:1 and 99:1 being better all things considered than the outcome 1:100. Since these two outcomes are better all things considered than the third, there must be some respect in which they are better. The difference is that in the levelling-down situation, just as in equal outcomes with fewer recipients and a smaller total of welfare, there has been such a great reduction of the welfare sum that the outcome is not better, but worse, all told.

3. The Person-Affecting Claim and the Value of Beginning to Exist

Since prioritarianism, like egalitarianism, is exposed to LDO, it violates what Parfit calls *the person-affecting claim*:[20]

> PAC: An outcome could not be better *in any respect* than another if it is not better *for* anybody.

However, once it has been noted, as I did earlier, that prioritarians, like egalitarians, are committed to there being an impersonal value of outcomes, which is not a value for anyone, I do not see that PAC has anything to recommend it: if there is an impersonal value, why could not an outcome be better in respect of it, though it is not better for anybody?

There is however a weaker person-affecting principle which both prioritarianism and egalitarianism could satisfy:

> PAC⋆: An outcome could not be better *all things considered* than another if it is not better for anybody.[21]

Although it is not anything that I shall attempt to vindicate here, I think PAC⋆ gives us all that we should demand in terms of person-affectivity: we should be disturbed only if we were forced to concede that something like levelling down could be better all things considered, though it is not better for anyone. The brand of egalitarianism that I favour satisfies PAC⋆ because it is what Parfit calls 'moderate'.[22] Although moderate

egalitarianism implies that a change cannot be better all things considered, unless it is better for someone, it does not collapse into utilitarianism because it implies that a change could be better all things considered, even though the sum of benefits is reduced. Thus, suppose that individuals who are much better off lose two units, while the same number of worse-off gain one unit. Moderate egalitarians could claim that this change is for the better all told because the gain in respect of equality outweighs the reduction in respect of the sum of benefits. They could claim this, though they hold that no gain in respect of equality, which is achieved simply by the better-off losing some of their benefits, is for the better all things considered, since under these circumstances the equality gain would always be in step with the loss of benefits. Consequently, the egalitarian aspect of the moderate view is not purely ornamental.

My brand of egalitarianism also features a related thesis which I call 'anti-inegalitarianism': unjust inequality in respect of the distribution of benefits is something bad in itself that detracts from the value of an outcome, but just equality is not anything good in itself that adds positively to the value of an outcome. According to anti-inegalitarianism, there is, for instance, nothing good about an equal outcome in which everyone is at the neutral or zero level, possessing no benefits whatsoever, i.e. there is nothing good about an outcome which is not good for anyone. Thus, on anti-inegalitarianism, the value of an outcome can never be higher than it is on utilitarianism: it is lower if the outcome features unjust inequality, and the same if there is no such inequality.[23]

Since my egalitarianism features this anti-inegalitarian thesis, it can be formulated as a claim which says that an outcome is better than another if and only if its *equality*-weighted (e-weighted) sum of benefits is greater. The e-weighted sum of benefits is determined by two factors: (a) the sum of benefits, and (b*) the degree of (unjust) inequality. (b*) is the counterpart of the prioritarian factor (b) in (P) (see Section 1), the average moral weight of benefits. According to anti-inegalitarianism, the strength of the (b*) factor subtracts from the value of the sum of benefits. When it is zero, nothing is subtracted, but equality is not an independent value which could exist in the absence of benefits, and which adds value over and above the value of the sum of benefits. It is instead a weight that operates upon the value of benefits. Since my egalitarianism is also moderate, it implies that when inequality is decreased merely by someone being worse off, the e-weighted sum is never greater, so the outcome is always worse all told.

Imagine that, on the basis of this, I were to claim that my form of egalitarianism is not exposed to LDO. Then it could be legitimately objected that this is a mere sleight-of-hand because the e-weighted sum of benefits is determined by the (b*) factor. Since the strength of this negative factor is reduced by levelling down, the outcome is in one respect better. But if this attempt to rescue my egalitarianism from LDO fails, prioritarianism is also exposed to LDO, and the related, more damaging objections that I have outlined, because there is improvement in respect of the counterpart (b) factor in (P).

It should however be noticed that the prioritarian claim that welfare diffusion, like the transition from 1:100 to 100:1, is for the better all things considered, violates PAC* if prioritarians do not commit themselves to VBE, the view that individuals could be benefited by beginning to exist. This is a view that prioritarians — as well as egalitarians and utilitarians — could adopt, but it is a view that some find problematic: could one sensibly speak of the value that non-existence has for someone who might never exist?

If one cannot, one cannot say that existence would be better or worse for that individual. Hence, an individual cannot be benefited (or harmed) by being caused to exist.

But I cannot see that there is any problem here.[24] I would grant that nothing can be intrinsically good or bad for an individual, unless that individual exists at some point. This is because I believe that nothing could be intrinsically good or bad for somebody, unless that individual has consciousness at some point. But then it follows that if somebody never exists, nothing is ever intrinsically good or bad for this individual, and this is tantamount to saying this individual is in an intrinsically neutral or indifferent state. Now, a state which is intrinsically neutral, i.e. neither intrinsically good nor bad, for someone, is worse than a state which would be intrinsically good overall for this individual and better than a state which would be intrinsically bad overall for this individual.

But can we refer to an individual while it is still uncertain whether or not this individual will ever exist? Yes, we can refer to an individual as the individual who would begin to exist if a certain sperm were to fertilize a certain ovum, provided that we could predict that this fertilization would result in one and only one individual (with consciousness). If we could also make reliable predications about the quality of life of this individual, we could tell whether that individual would be benefited or harmed by beginning to exist. Moreover, if a conscious individual already exists, we could tell whether this individual is better or worse off than she would have been had she never existed if we could tell whether her existence is above the neutral level of non-existent individuals. There is then no need for it to have been possible to pick her out before she came into existence. Thus, I think that VBE can be vindicated, though it is a view that prioritarians can consistently reject, just as egalitarians or utilitarians can do.[25]

However, whatever their attitude to VBE, prioritarians *are* committed to holding that bringing into existence individuals who will be at the neutral level, at which existence is neither good nor bad, is something that makes the outcome neither better nor worse. As we have seen, according to prioritarianism, the outcomes 1:100 and 1:100 + 99:0 are of equal value all things considered. Utilitarians also make the judgement that these outcomes are of equal value (though the value they assign is different), whereas egalitarians would judge the outcome 1:100 + 99:0 worse (assuming that its inequality is unfair). This is why egalitarians can resist DWD; obviously, they regard the outcome 100:1 as better than 1:100 + 99:0. In the latter respect, they join with prioritarians in opposition to utilitarians.

If prioritarians do not accept VBE, but nevertheless endorse DWD (so that outcomes get better in the Series), their view will conflict with PAC* — as well as with PAC, of course. Since prioritarians have criticized egalitarians for violating PAC, I believe that they should be inclined to accept PAC* and, so, VBE. It might be suggested that prioritarians can uphold PAC* without accepting VBE by denying DWD. But we have seen that they cannot deny DWD: the outcome value of e.g. 100:1 *is* greater than that of 1:100, since its sum of p-weighted benefits is indisputably greater. Prioritarians would have to concede that 100:1 is better all told because its outcome value is greater though, on the present assumption, it is not better for anyone. This violates PAC*.

Suppose, however, that prioritarians reject VBE and that they really mean it when they say, as does Parfit, that their view is that 'it is morally more important to benefit people who are worse off',[26] that what we morally ought or have moral reason to do is *to benefit* individuals in proportion to how badly off they are and not to produce the outcome in

which individuals *have* the greatest sum of p-weighted benefits. Then it would follow that prioritarians have no moral reason to affect welfare diffusion, e.g. a transition from 1:100 to 100:1. So, if prioritarians reject VBE, it seemingly makes a difference whether they state their view in terms of the verb 'to benefit', as Parfit does, or in terms of having benefits, as I have done.

Nonetheless, if their prioritarianism is teleological, they must have a view about the value of outcomes like 1:100 and 100:1. And I do not see how they could deny that the value of 100:1 is greater, since benefits here go to individuals who are worse off. But then it might seem strange to maintain that we have *no* moral reason whatsoever to affect a transition from the former to the latter (or let such a transition occur); it might seem more natural to claim that we have an 'impersonal' reason to promote such a better outcome which might be weaker than the 'person-regarding' reason to benefit individuals. This would reduce the difference between these prioritarians and those who accept VBE and claim that we have as much of a moral reason to benefit individuals by causing them to exist.[27]

However, even if one is uncertain whether prioritarianism should be applied to different number cases like the Series, it is instructive to see what follows *if* it is applied to them. This is so because by introducing additional people we can lower the welfare level of individuals existing in an outcome without reducing the total sum of welfare of the outcome. We can thereby obtain outcomes that are better all things considered, though the level of welfare is lower in them, as is the case with 100:1 compared to 100:1. Since these outcomes are better all things considered, there must be some respect in which they are better, and in which they would continue to be better even if their sum of welfare was less. This is that the average weight of benefits is higher. However, the average weight of benefits grows higher whenever somebody becomes worse off. Thus, according to prioritarianism, an outcome becomes in one respect better when somebody becomes worse off. This counter-intuitive conclusion would hold good even if prioritarianism were not applied to different number cases. So, the application to such cases helps us to understand (teleological) prioritarianism. Thus, I do not agree with Parfit when he writes that, in making up our minds about egalitarianism and prioritarianism, it is 'enough' to consider same number cases;[28] it is illuminating to look at different number cases.

Teleologians who accept VBE will claim that adding individuals who will lead good lives makes an outcome better by benefiting those individuals. According to utilitarianism, it will make the outcome better to the same degree as it benefits these individuals. But, according to prioritarianism, you could make an outcome better by adding new individuals at a low level instead of raising the level of those already in existence if they are at higher levels to start with. Thus, prioritarianism generates a stronger reason to add new individuals than utilitarianism does.

It might be thought that an acceptance of VBE will have a similar impact on egalitarianism. There seems to be reason to cause individuals to exist and lead worthwhile lives not only because this will increase the sum of benefits, but also because it will reduce unjust inequality, by reducing the number of merely possible individuals at the neutral level of non-existence. What is even worse, egalitarians seem to have a reason to reduce the number of existing individuals who have good lives, since this will also reduce inequality, by bringing more down to the countless possible individuals at the neutral level of non-existence.[29]

There are, however, two reasons why I do not think that the creation of individuals will have any repercussion on unfair inequality. Suppose that we understand 'possible individuals' as the individuals whom the individuals existing at a given time, e.g. the present, could bring into existence. Then the possible individuals who could be brought into existence by the individuals existing at t_1, the possible individuals at t_1, will be different from the possible individuals who could be brought into existence at a later time, t_2, the possible individuals at t_2, when some of the possible individuals at t_1 have been brought into existence. The possible individuals at t_2 are likely to be more numerous, because more existing people could have more offspring. If so, bringing individuals into (or out of) existence might not have any impact on equality by changing the proportion between those who have worthwhile lives and those who are merely possible at the neutral level of non-existence; rather, the proportion might be roughly constant.

Suppose instead that we try to fix the class of possible individuals by understanding it as 'the possible individuals at t_1, *and* at t_2, *and* at t_3, etc.', for every time at which it is possible for individuals to have offspring. Then the problem is instead that the class of possible individuals seems indefinite or indeterminate, since there is no definite time at which individuals will cease to be able to have offspring. If so, then again bringing individuals into, or out of existence, will not change the proportion between those who have worthwhile lives and those who are merely possible in a determinate way.

Another reason for denying that an acceptance of VBE will generate a further reason for egalitarians to procreate is that it is not clear that those who remain merely possible, but who would have had good lives had they existed, are subject to an inequality that is *unjust or unfair*. Can we plausibly claim that they unfairly had smaller chances of coming into existence than those who did come into existence? Is coming into existence not more like a fair than an unfair lottery? I would say 'yes', at least as long as we do not introduce extensive genetic scanning of fertilized eggs and sort out some on unfair grounds.

My claim that prioritarianism implies DWD entails that it leads to the repugnant conclusion — in fact, a more malign form of it, since it implies that one outcome in which many lead lives barely worth living could be better than another in which many fewer lead very good lives, *even though the sum of welfare is smaller in the former*.[30] But this is not an objection I wish to press, since egalitarianism and utilitarianism also fall victim to the repugnant conclusion — albeit in the milder form that an outcome in which many lead lives on the same low level is as good as an outcome in which fewer lead very good lives as long as the total sum of benefits is the same. My view is that the best way to avoid the repugnant conclusion is by distinguishing between benefits of higher and lower qualities in a fashion that I have sketched elsewhere.[31] This is a way out that prioritarians could also adopt, with the result that their view would no longer entail DWD.

But this would not remove the chief objection against prioritarianism that I have used welfare diffusion to bring out: that transitions from equality at higher welfare levels to equality at lower levels are always an improvement in one respect, however great the reduction in respect of total sum of welfare. That such reductions of welfare are improvements in one respect is an implication that distinguishes prioritarianism from egalitarianism, since it is rooted in the fact that prioritarianism weights benefits in proportion to the absolute welfare level of recipients. It is an implication that seems much more implausible than that levelling down, which affects the relative positions of recipients, is an improvement in one respect.[32]

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NOTES

1 Derek Parfit, 'Equality or priority?' (The Lindley lecture) (Lawrence, KS: The University of Kansas, 1995), p. 17.
2 Parfit 1995 op. cit., p. 18.
3 Parfit 1995 op. cit., p. 9.
4 Inequality in respect of welfare is unjust if something like the following two conditions are satisfied: (1) there is nothing, like deserts or rights, to make it just that someone is worse off than someone else, and (2) it is not voluntarily chosen by the worse off.
5 Parfit 1995 op. cit., p. 22.
6 I think that, like egalitarians, prioritarians need to add a clause to the effect that the lower level of welfare of individuals must not be due to their fault or voluntary choice. It is not clear, for instance, that benefits to those who voluntarily choose to be badly off have the greater weight that these benefits would reasonably have had if the recipients had preferred to be better off.
7 See Parfit op. cit., pp. 22–4.
8 For a similar kind of objection against prioritarianism, see Michael Otsuka & Alex Voorhoeve, 'Why it matters that some are worse off than others: An argument against the priority view', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 37 (2009): 171–99.
9 See D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 329–36.
10 For this defence of egalitarianism against LDO, see Larry Temkin, *Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), chap. 9.
11 See Ingmar Persson, 'Equality, priority and person-affecting value', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 4 (2001): 23–39, at p. 28.
12 For the sake of completeness, I also considered other prioritarian possibilities in 'Why levelling down could be worse for prioritarianism than for egalitarianism', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 11 (2008): 295–303, at pp. 301–2.
13 Parfit 1995 op. cit., p. 23.
14 By 'utilitarianism' I mean a maximizing utilitarianism which takes the best outcome to be the one that contains the greatest total sum of benefits, not an average utilitarianism which takes it to be the outcome with the highest average level of benefits.
15 I am sceptical of the idea of assigning numerical values to states of welfare, but acquiesce in it for the purpose of simple illustration.
16 For an earlier presentation of this type of argument, see Ingmar Persson, 'Prioritarianism, levelling down and welfare diffusion', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 14 (2011): 311–5.
17 This is on the assumption that these doctrines take a simple quantitative view of welfare, and do not include a claim to the effect that there are lexically higher and lower forms of welfare.
18 Parfit 1995 op. cit., pp. 23–4.
19 N. Holtug, *Persons, Interests, and Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 216.
20 1995 op. cit., p. 32.
21 Persson 2008 op. cit., p. 302.
22 1995 op. cit., p. 30.
23 For a fuller account of my form of egalitarianism, see Persson 2008 op. cit.
24 For further discussion, see Ingmar Persson, 'Rights and the asymmetry between good and bad lives' in M. Roberts and D. Wasserman (eds.) *Harming Future Persons* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009).
25 It should be noticed that, even if you endorse VBE, you could still claim that we have a stronger moral reason to benefit existing individuals in certain circumstances than we have to bring individuals into existence with the same benefits. This could be so when the existing individuals have certain attitudes to their future, e.g. wishes or hopes to be benefited.
26 1995 op. cit., p. 22.

27 Though, as remarked in note 25, those who endorse VBE can hold that there are circumstances in which there are special reasons to benefit those who exist, e.g. when they have preferences and plans for the future.
28 1995 op. cit., p. 2.
29 However, anti-inegalitarians will not have any reason to exterminate everyone and bring about a state of perfect equality of everyone being at the neutral level of non-existence, since we have seen that equality in the absence of benefits has no value.
30 Holtug calls this the 'Super-Repugnant Conclusion' (op. cit., p. 254), but it does not make him give up prioritarianism. For an exposition of the original repugnant conclusion in which the sum of welfare is constant, see Parfit 1984 op. cit., chap. 17.
31 Ingmar Persson, 'The root of the repugnant conclusion and its rebuttal' in J. Ryberg & T. Tännsjö (eds) *The Repugnant Conclusion* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004).
32 This paper has been presented at seminars at the Universities of Copenhagen, Hull and Oxford. Many thanks to participants for helpful comments, especially to Derek Parfit who was a respondent on the last occasion.