

Equality, Priority and Sufficiency

To sum up our discussion of social justice, here are some different views about what matters in the distribution of goods. These distinctions may seem subtle or abstract, but they're deeply important. We can't bring about justice as long as we're confused about what justice requires.

Equality: what matters is comparative—everyone should be at the same level of well-being. (In the real world, this may imply parity of wealth.) We might care about equality for its own sake (*intrinsic egal.*) or as a means to achieving other important goods, like social cohesion (*instrumental egal.*). Moreover, we might care about inequality only in so far as it results from people mistreating others (*deontic egal.*), or because that very state of affairs seems bad (*telic egal.*). In the *divided world*, no one mistreated anyone, but there's massive inequality. This bothers telic egalitarians, but not deontic egalitarians.

Key objection: *leveling down*. Suppose we could bring about equality only by bringing down the better off. Is there a reason to do so? How could there be if doing so wouldn't make any individual any better off?

Priority: what matters is improving the position of the worst off; benefits to the worse off count for more than benefits to the better off. Parfit claims this is because of the absolute position of the worse off, not their relation to the better off.

Key objection: *Rich vs. Superrich*. Suppose everyone is at least rich, with some others being superrich. If we have some goods to distribute, why should we care about giving them to the rich rather than the superrich, given that both already have everything they need?

Sufficiency: what matters isn't comparative, but how well off people are in absolute terms. Perhaps we should give priority to the worst off below the threshold of sufficiency, but over it we need not. (Different views are possible here: on one view, over the line the state should cease to intervene at all; on another view, the state should maximize average utility; etc.)

Key objection: *the immortal*. If the superrich can afford technology that will make them immortal, could we reject the claims of the rich that there was something unfair about their position?