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Egalitarianism Reconsidered

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Abstract

This paper argues that egalitarian theories should be judged by the degree to which they meet four different challenges. Fundamentalist egalitarianism, which contends that certain inequalities are intrinsically bad or unjust regardless of their consequences, fails to meet these challenges. Building on discussions by T.M. Scanlon and David Miller, we argue that egalitarianism is better understood in terms of commitments to six egalitarian objectives. A consequence of our view, in contrast to Martin O'Neill's "non-intrinsic egalitarianism," is that egalitarianism is better understood as a family of views than as a single ethical position.

Keywords

egalitarianism, equality, fairness, justice

Egalitarians find inequalities morally objectionable. The fact that life expectancy differs by 20 years as one journeys out along Washington D.C. Metro lines reveals serious injustice.¹ Egalitarians would like to do something about widening economic inequalities in the United States and about even greater global inequalities. Why? Many of the reasons place no intrinsic importance on equality. The differences in life expectancy around Washington, D.C. might be morally significant merely because they show that many people are dying younger than they need to. Economic inequalities are important because of the suffering of those who are poor, regardless of whether inequality itself is a bad thing. Is inequality itself a bad thing? If not, what's left of egalitarianism as a position in political philosophy? We shall argue inequality is not itself a bad thing, but a family of egalitarian positions nevertheless remains.

¹ See C. Murray et al., *U.S. Patterns of Mortality by County and Race: 1965-94*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Center for Population and Developmental Studies, 1998) for statistics on this phenomenon.

1 What's Wrong with Inequalities?

Is there anything wrong with inequalities—that is, differences between people with respect to things that people care about or that bear on their interests—apart from their role as symptoms and causes of some other sort of wrong or harm? Why should mere difference matter morally? David Miller poses this question as follows:

Why should *equality* be thought desirable? Equality after all means a leveling of differences; ... to treat people in such a way would be at best perverse and at worst immoral. The pursuit of equality seems to be impaled on a fork: either the ultimate end of the pursuit is not equality at all but some other value or values which have become confused in the popular mind with equality, or our societies are aiming at a goal that cursory inspection reveals to be quite monstrous.²

Call this “the Miller challenge:” What’s bad about inequality?

One response to the Miller challenge is to grant his critique, adopt the first horn of the dilemma he describes, and abandon egalitarianism as a philosophical position—though not as a political goal that furthers other moral objectives. According to this response, there is nothing intrinsically bad about inequalities themselves, but the inequalities that characterize our world are nevertheless awful because of bad consequences such as the misery of those who are worse off.³ According to this view, what is shocking about the disparity in life expectancy between Japan and Angola is not that the difference is 43 years, but that life expectancy in Angola is only 38. The misery, shame, helplessness, degradation, and enforced servility of those who are poor give one good reason to fight against inequalities in wealth. The limitation of freedom and the stunting of intellect and sensibility caused by poor education give one reason to fight against inequalities in schooling. The suffering of those who are sick and the shrinking of their lives give one reason to fight against inequalities in health. But none of these concerns support egalitarianism (or prioritarianism) as philosophical positions.

A second response, attributed to philosophers such as Larry Temkin, Richard Arneson and G.A. Cohen, is to maintain that the badness of inequality is, *prima facie*, a basic moral principle.⁴ Someone who needs to ask why

² David Miller, ‘Arguments for Equality,’ in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* (1982), p. 72.

³ See Harry Frankfurt ‘Equality as a Moral Ideal,’ *Ethics* 98 (1987) and Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁴ See Richard Arneson, ‘Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare,’ *Philosophical Studies* 56 (1989); G.A. Cohen, ‘On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice,’ *Ethics* 99 (1989); Larry Temkin, *Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and ‘Egalitarianism Defended,’ *Ethics* 113 (2003).

inequalities with respect to anything bearing on people's interests are bad shows moral blindness. Prioritarians who maintain that assigning greater weight to the interests of those who are in absolute terms worse off is a basic moral principle take a similar tack.⁵ Let us call this response "fundamentalism" or "fundamentalist egalitarianism," because it relies on what it regards as a fundamental intuition. Parfit describes such positions as "telic" as opposed to "deontic" egalitarianism, but as Martin O'Neill argues, this distinction fails to capture relevant differences between egalitarian positions, and we shall not rely on it.⁶ In section 3, we shall argue that apart from some contestable intuitions, fundamentalist egalitarianism has little to be said for it.

A third way to respond to Miller's challenge is to argue, as Miller himself does, that although equality itself is of no moral importance, there are specifically egalitarian objectives to which equality in certain regards contributes. Inequalities are symptoms and causes of failures to achieve these egalitarian objectives. One might, for example, argue that equality of respect or moral standing, which arguably lies at the core of all moral theory, condemns the quotidian inequalities to which egalitarians object.⁷

This argument is an instance of a general strategy that Miller and more recently O'Neill have pursued, which involves identifying egalitarian ends that equality with respect to some egalitarian currency serves. In section 4, we shall build on Miller's discussion to develop this sort of egalitarian view.

2 Challenges or Tasks for Egalitarians

An egalitarian theory must show that there is something bad or unjust about inequalities apart from the consequences of inequalities for unrelated ethical objectives. Egalitarians need not of course deny that inequalities may have all sorts of consequences that are objectionable to non-egalitarians. Indeed, for political purposes egalitarians will want to emphasize the many different

⁵ See Derek Parfit, 'Equality or Priority,' Lindley Lecture (1991), reprinted in M. Clayton and A. Williams (eds.), *The Ideal of Equality* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

⁶ See Martin O'Neill, 'What Should Egalitarians Believe?,' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 36 (2008).

⁷ See Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

grounds upon which to condemn the inequalities that characterize the contemporary world. But the first challenge for an egalitarian political theory is to identify reasons why inequalities are bad, beyond their consequences with respect to non-egalitarian moral concerns.

The second task for egalitarian theories is to specify *which* kinds of inequalities are objectionable and why just those inequalities. Egalitarians do not object to all differences among people. They are not uniformitarians seeking a world in which people are as much alike as possible, and they are not alarmed at any inequality or difference with respect to anything that people may care about. Only some inequalities are bad. Which ones? There are large disagreements in the literature. Some egalitarians defend equality of welfare. Others disagree and instead condemn inequalities in resources, capabilities, or opportunity for welfare. Still others criticize inequalities in the relations among individuals. No egalitarian theory will be acceptable unless it is able to draw a non-arbitrary line between those things that should be equalized and those that need not be. What egalitarians condemn is not inequality, but inequality with respect to X , where X may be multi-dimensional. Egalitarian theories must specify what X is, and they must explain why inequality with respect to X is intrinsically bad, while inequality with respect to Y is not.

If X is something like wealth or welfare, then it will depend in part on individual choices and character. How, if at all, should individual responsibility bear on the assessment of inequalities? The third task for the egalitarian is to specify exactly how responsibility is relevant to the appraisal of inequalities. Luck egalitarians have argued that distribution should be influenced by traits for which individuals are responsible and should not be influenced by traits for which individuals are not responsible.⁸ For example, Dworkin's central argument for equalizing resources rather than welfare is that people are not responsible for the resources they possess, while they are responsible for converting those resources into welfare.⁹ Elizabeth Anderson, in contrast, argues

⁸ For a technically sophisticated presentation of the principles implicit in these claims about responsibility and a demonstration that it is impossible to satisfy them all, see Marc Fleurbaey, *Fairness, Responsibility and Welfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Luck egalitarians also disagree about how to understand responsibility. Arneson and Cohen tie responsibility to (free) choice, while Dworkin links responsibility to "the beliefs and attitudes that define what a successful life would be like" in 'What is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981). See Dworkin's *Sovereign Virtue*, Chapter 7 and T.M. Scanlon 'Equality of Resources and Equality of Welfare: A Forced Marriage?' *Ethics* 97 (1986) for similar arguments about responsibility. Fleurbaey has yet a third interpretation of responsibility in Chapter 10 of *Fairness, Responsibility, and Welfare*.

⁹ Dworkin, 'What Is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources'.

that luck egalitarian views like Dworkin's condone inequalities to which egalitarians should object.¹⁰

The fourth and last challenge arises from the fact that equality is not the only relevant moral consideration. If lessening inequalities would violate rights, make people worse off, or limit freedom, then the egalitarian must balance the demands of equality against these competing considerations. Equality must have some non-trivial weight, or else a position would scarcely count as egalitarian, but no plausible version of egalitarianism will weight equality so heavily that other moral considerations count only as tie-breakers. Furthermore, the weighting of these competing considerations must not be arbitrary. Egalitarians should provide some rationale for weighting inequalities as they do. (A similar constraint applies of course to everyone who admits a plurality of values, whether or not they place any weight on equality.)

In summary, this section has identified four challenges for egalitarian theories:

1. An egalitarian theory must show why inequalities are bad or unjust apart from their consequences with respect to moral considerations unrelated to egalitarian concerns.
2. It must specify *which inequalities* ("X") are objectionable and which are not and why.
3. It must specify what individuals are responsible for and to what extent individual responsibility justifies inequalities in X or determines what X should be.
4. It must say something about how to balance inequalities in X against other moral considerations.

One way to appraise alternative construals of egalitarianism is to examine how well they succeed in meeting these four challenges.

Because individuals are not generally responsible for differences in welfare, resources, opportunities, or capabilities across religious, ethnic, or geographical groups, luck egalitarians will generally find differences among such groups to be *prima facie* injustices. In addition, data about inequalities across groups are more readily available to policy makers than data about inequalities across individuals, and social policies to address inequalities across groups are more feasible than social policies to address inequalities across individuals. For these reasons, egalitarians often focus on inequalities across groups, even when they are mainly concerned about inequalities among individuals.

¹⁰ See Elizabeth Anderson, 'What is the Point of Equality?', *Ethics* 99 (1999).

3 Fundamentalist Egalitarianism

Fundamentalist egalitarianism treats inequalities as intrinsically bad or unjust, as bad or unjust in themselves, regardless of their consequences. If one thinks about a problem such as cutting a cake, the fundamentalist's view seems plausible. Absent some competing moral consideration, a fair division is an equal division. But whether all inequalities are bad or unjust in themselves is doubtful. Consider Parfit's example of the Divided World, which consists of two populations of uniform but unequal welfare, the members of which are unaware of and causally irrelevant to each other.¹¹ Fundamentalists would condemn the inequality. The situation is, in Larry Temkin's language "comparatively unfair".¹²

Temkin, Arneson, and Cohen appear to have put forward fundamentalist egalitarian positions (and defenders of prioritarianism are typically fundamentalist with respect to the claim that those who are less well off in absolute terms have stronger claims).¹³ If one allows the intuition that inequality is intrinsically bad to count as "showing why inequalities are bad," then a fundamentalist view apparently meets the first challenge, which requires that egalitarian theories show why inequalities are objectionable apart from their consequences with respect to unrelated moral considerations.

¹¹ Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?', pp. 87-88.

¹² Temkin, 'Egalitarianism Defended,' p. 796.

¹³ When one looks harder, however, it is doubtful whether Temkin is in fact a fundamentalist or indeed whether his views count as a version of egalitarianism at all, because he denies that equality is, *prima facie*, good when there are differences in what people deserve. He writes, "In fact, I think that deserved inequalities ... are not bad at all. The reason for this is simple. *Undeserved* inequality is unfair, but *deserved* inequality is not" ('Egalitarianism Defended,' p. 767). Instead of maintaining that a state of affairs in which the wicked are just as well off as the virtuous is in one way good (because of its equality). Temkin holds that equality is a bad thing, because unfair, when there are differences in desert. It seems that in Temkin's view, what matters is whether well-being is proportional to desert, not equality (*Inequality*, pp. 138-140). Shelley Kagan argues for a more ambitious general thesis that desert preempts equality: once one recognizes the demands of desert, insisting on equality adds nothing. See Shelly Kagan 'Equality and Desert' in L. Pojman and O. McLeod (eds.) *What Do We Deserve: A Reader on Justice and Desert* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). In reply to Kagan, Serena Olsaretti argues that valuing equality does make a difference when one is considering starting points, where no one yet deserves anything, or when considering different patterns of desert itself. See Serena Olsaretti 'Unmasking Equality? Kagan on Equality and Desert,' *Utilitas* Vol. 14, No.3 (2002). In addition, egalitarians can respond to Kagan by maintaining—as Fleurbaey suggests in Chapter 10 of *Fairness, Responsibility, and Welfare*—that instead of determining a just distribution, desert depends on a prior theory of distributional justice.

But the fundamentalist has more trouble with the second task, which requires that egalitarians specify which inequalities are objectionable. As Cohen recognizes and Sen emphasizes, equalizing with respect to X requires inequalities with respect to Y .¹⁴ Why are inequalities with respect to X objectionable, while inequalities with respect to Y just fine, or if the fundamentalist finds inequalities with respect to both X and Y to be objectionable, how should he or she justify the weights placed on the different inequalities?

There is a complicated interdependence between the second task—specifying what X is—and the third task—clarifying when and how responsibility justifies inequalities in X . Does responsibility justify inequalities in X or should it determine what X should be? Cohen asserts that: “On my understanding of egalitarianism, it does not enjoin redress of or compensation for disadvantage as such. It attends, rather, to ‘involuntary’ disadvantage, which is the sort that does not reflect the subject’s choice.”¹⁵ Yet he also maintains that “genuine choice excuses otherwise unacceptable inequalities.”¹⁶ In our view, Cohen’s emphasis on choice drives him to take X to be involuntary advantage rather than simply advantage. But after having determined what it is that he wants to equalize, a fundamentalist egalitarian like Cohen has no moral interest in the causes of inequalities with respect to that.¹⁷

That brings us to the fourth task, that egalitarians integrate concerns about equality with other moral concerns. Fundamentalist egalitarianism is absurd if it maintains that nothing matters except equality, and it is empty if it does not place serious weight on lessening inequalities. Although “leveling down” (valuing a more equal outcome that does not benefit anybody) is not absurd, it conflicts with what John Broome calls the principle of the personal good, that no change can be good unless it is good for someone, and egalitarians, even fundamentalist egalitarians, need not favor leveling down.¹⁸ One simple way to avoid doing so for an egalitarian such as Temkin, who considers both the amount and distribution of welfare, is to take the goodness of some state of affairs to depend both on aggregate welfare and on a measure of inequality. Suppose there are two people with well-being w_1 and w_2 , with $w_1 \geq w_2$ and one

¹⁴ See Cohen, ‘On the Currency,’ p. 909 and Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*.

¹⁵ Cohen, ‘On the Currency,’ p. 920.

¹⁶ Cohen, ‘On the Currency,’ p. 931.

¹⁷ Since choice, unlike desert, implies no principle of distribution itself, Cohen’s egalitarianism, in contrast to Temkin’s position, avoids collapsing into something other than egalitarianism.

¹⁸ See John Broome ‘Fairness, Goodness, and Leveling Down’, in C. Murray, J. Salomon, C. Mathers, and A. Lopez (eds.), *Summary Measures of Population Health: Concepts, Ethics, Measurement and Applications* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002), p. 136.

takes the measure of inequality to be simply the difference in their well-being. Then one might take the overall goodness of a state of affairs to be $w_1 + w_2 - a(w_1 - w_2)$, where a is the weight placed on inequality.¹⁹ If a is less than one, then this formula is increasing in w_1 and w_2 , which means that it conforms to the principle of the personal good. The closer a is to one, the larger the weight the egalitarian places on equality. For example, if $a = .8$, then an egalitarian will prefer a distribution of 13 units of welfare to one person and 11 to another, to a distribution where the first has 20 units and the second has 10.

But there is a fly in the ointment. Where does the value of a , the weight to be placed on avoiding inequality, come from? This is a hard problem for egalitarians in general, not just for fundamentalists. But it is particularly challenging for fundamentalists, because they do not tie the value of equality to the concerns of individuals. It is difficult to see what possible arguments fundamentalist egalitarians could make for one value as opposed to another. Prioritizing different moral considerations is, of course, a problem for everyone, and one of the attractions of utilitarianism is its solution to or avoidance of the problem. But typically there are arguments to be made. For example, Rawls argues for the priority of liberty rather than stipulating it. Fundamentalists, in contrast, can only thump their guts. In the simple illustration given above, some might like a value of a of .5, while others might like .9. The problem for fundamentalists is not that they have not yet solved this problem. The problem is that they have no resources with which to address this problem, because their argument for equality does not share anything with arguments for competing moral concerns.

In our view, as in the view of many others, egalitarianism must be anchored in some regard in which most people are in fact equal, and it must be linked to fundamental interests these equal agents share.²⁰ “Equality ... is not, in the first instance, a distributive ideal, and its aim is not to compensate for misfortune. It is, instead, a moral ideal governing the relations in which people stand to one another.”²¹ In Parfit’s divided world, people have no relations with those in the other half, and they have no interests in the mere comparison of how well off they are.

¹⁹ Broome, *Fairness*, p. 136.

²⁰ See, for instance, Anderson, “What is the Point of Equality?,” Samuel Scheffler ‘What is Egalitarianism,’ *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 31 (2003); John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); and Bernard Williams ‘The Ideal Of Equality’ in P. Laslett and W. Runciman (eds.) *Philosophy, Politics, and Society* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1962).

²¹ Scheffler, ‘What Is Egalitarianism?’, p. 21.

In our view, fundamentalists fail to show why inequalities are bad or unjust and how their badness or injustice should be weighed against other moral concerns, and they thereby fail to accomplish the first, second, and fourth tasks or to respond to Miller's challenge. All fundamentalists can say in favor of their view is that it matches our intuitions or that it helps explain more specific moral judgments. But not everyone shares the intuitions, and there are plausible competing explanations for the outrage many people feel at the egregious inequalities that characterize the world today. It is difficult to know whether the intuitive dislike of existing inequalities (which we share with the fundamentalist) shows that we find inequalities intrinsically bad or whether it shows our condemnation of the suffering of those who are worse off. Without experience of a world in which inequalities do not correlate with suffering, oppression, and humiliation, how can we be confident of the judgment that inequality is itself intrinsically a bad thing? To explain what is wrong with inequalities by saying that equality is intrinsically valuable or that one should give special weight to the interests of the worse off invites virtually the same question that one was supposed to answer. The fundamentalist egalitarian owes us some account of why inequalities matter, just as the prioritarian owes us some account of why improving the well-being of those who are badly off in absolute terms matters more than improving the well-being of other people. Justifying egalitarianism and coming up with some principled way to trade off the demands of equality and other moral considerations requires an account of the basis of equality and of how equality is relevant to the fundamental interests of moral agents.²² There is no intuitive shortcut to a defensible egalitarianism.

4 Non-Fundamentalist Egalitarianism

Suppose we abandon the view that egalitarianism rests on some fundamental intuition that inequalities are bad in themselves. Can we no longer be "genuine" egalitarians, as Temkin maintains?²³ If inequalities are bad only because of their consequences, and those consequences bear no connection to peculiarly egalitarian concerns, then there would be no defensible egalitarian philosophical position. For example, utilitarians who favor equalizing

²² O'Neill makes much the same argument, "On a Non-Intrinsic egalitarian view, the skeptic about egalitarianism can be countered by a detailed account of the variety of considerations in which the badness of inequality is grounded. The Telic egalitarian can appeal to no such further reasons" (O'Neill, p. 134).

²³ See Temkin, *Inequality*, p. 8.

income because they hold that doing so will increase total happiness are not egalitarians.

Some of the ends toward which equalizing resources, well-being, social status, and so forth are means are however themselves egalitarian objectives. Those who favor diminishing inequalities in resources and social status because they object to stigmatizing differences in status or because they seek to strengthen social solidarity are arguably egalitarians. However one labels those who object to the domination of some people by others or who place an intrinsic value on solidarity, their objectives are themselves egalitarian. Unlike utilitarians who favor an egalitarian policy because it conduces to an unrelated end, those who are concerned about inequalities in moral status or social exclusion favor egalitarian policies because they conduce to egalitarian ends. We shall accordingly call these people egalitarians. Whether their positions can meet the challenges egalitarianism faces any better than can fundamentalist egalitarianism is a separate question, addressed below in section 6.

We shall accordingly respond to Miller's challenge as Miller himself does by arguing that equality has more than merely an instrumental connection to some of the ends it serves. Our discussion modifies Miller's in three ways. First, we shall mention two other ends that equality may serve, which have been highlighted by T.M. Scanlon and others.²⁴ Second, we shall explicitly restrict the question why equalities matter by limiting the context to social policy. There are reasons why the state should treat individuals equally that do not apply to the conduct of parents toward their children or the leaders of a Church toward its members. Third, and most importantly, we shall argue in Section 5 that the different ends that equality serves define different objects of egalitarian concern and point to a view of egalitarianism as a family of concerns rather than as a single ethical position.

Here then is the supplemented list of ends that equality may serve and to which equality has an intrinsic connection. Scanlon discusses the second and fourth on the list. The other four are due to Miller:

1. *Inequalities in opportunities or in the distribution of benefits and burdens may be unfair.* Inequalities in the social distribution of benefits or burdens require justification. When there is no reason justifying inequalities, benefits and burdens (or the chances of receiving them) should be distributed equally.

²⁴ See T.M. Scanlon, 'The Diversity of Objections to Equality,' The Lindley Lecture (1997), reprinted in *The Difficulty of Tolerance: Essays in Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

2. *Inequalities in wealth and political power may undermine the integrity and impartiality of social institutions and practices.* Such disparities can undermine the legitimacy of courts and elections, and degrade institutions that provide public education or health care. It may be impossible for government to make good even on its obligation to provide equal protection to its residents if economic inequalities are permitted to grow large. The inequalities that are at issue here are inequalities in economic resources and political power, rather than inequalities in state-distributed benefits or burdens.
3. *Inequalities in valued possessions, life prospects, political influence, and social status threaten self-respect.* They can lead to servility and undue deference to those who have a favored status. Except when they have behaved stupidly or immorally, individuals should be able to say, “I am as good as anybody else.”²⁵ Those who are homeless in affluent countries such as the United States will have a hard time maintaining their self-respect in the face of poverty, insecurity, and the suspicions, fears and contempt of the more fortunate.
4. *Inequalities in life prospects, opportunity, political influence, and social status may fail to show equal respect.* These inequalities stigmatize people and treat some people as of greater intrinsic worth than others. “While [people] differ profoundly as individuals in capacity and character, they are equally entitled as human beings to consideration and respect.”²⁶ The duty to show equal respect is linked to a basic element in morality, which is the recognition of people’s moral standing—their authority “to make claims and demands of one another as equal free and rational agents.”²⁷ The equality in question here is equality in life prospects, political influence, and state-distributed benefits and burdens, not equality in valued possessions or social status.
5. *Inequalities in crucial resources, in status, and in socially valued possessions may create barriers to friendship, community, and love.* Here again the link between inequality and injustice may depend on the existence of some deprivation and not only inequality. The inequalities that are relevant to fraternity are inequalities in crucial resources, in status, and in socially valued possessions, rather than inequalities in opportunities or state-distributed benefits or burdens.

²⁵ See J.C. Davies, *Human Nature in Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1963), p. 45.

²⁶ See R.H. Tawney, *Equality* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1931), p. 34.

²⁷ See Stephen Darwall, “Respect and the Second-Person Standpoint,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 78(2), p. 43.

6. *Inequalities in political power, crucial resources, or life prospects, may subjugate some people to others.* Those who possess vital resources can dominate those without. Those who lack political power will typically be dominated by those with power. The inequalities at stake here are inequalities in political power and inequalities in life prospects and crucial resources, which lead to and follow from inequalities in political power, rather than inequalities in luxuries or state-distributed benefits and burdens.

Unlike total happiness or economic growth, these six objectives—to avoid unfairness, to protect impartiality, to sustain self-respect, to show equal respect, to nurture fraternity, and to prevent domination—are themselves egalitarian concerns. These six objectives have been prominent among the objectives of those who have fought under the banner of equality. They are not beneficial consequences in which egalitarians have no particular interest. They lie at the heart of egalitarianism. What makes someone an egalitarian is caring about these objectives.

Although this list of egalitarian objectives is not original, drawing as it does explicitly from Miller and Scanlon, the view of egalitarianism it embodies does not derive from O'Neill's "non-intrinsic egalitarianism", which assembles similar components.²⁸ Drawing also from Scanlon (although not from Miller), O'Neill also maintains that non-intrinsic egalitarians are concerned about six things: (a) suffering and deprivation, (b) stigmatizing differences in status, (c) domination, (d) weakening self-respect, (e) servility, and (f) undermining fraternity.²⁹ Setting aside (a) as not necessarily an egalitarian concern, O'Neill argues that concerns about the badness of (b)—(f) are distinctively egalitarian.³⁰

Our view is obviously much the same, and (b)—(f) capture under different labels the same values as our third, fourth, fifth, and sixth egalitarian objectives. O'Neill notes that egalitarians are also concerned about unfairness, but he wants to distinguish sharply between those aspects of inequalities that are bad and those that are unfair.³¹ Unlike the view of egalitarianism we defend, which is not concerned to distinguish the badness from the injustice of inequalities, his "non-intrinsic" egalitarianism is designed to be an account specifically of the badness of inequalities. Further differences will emerge in the next section.

²⁸ See Martin O'Neill, 'What Should Egalitarians Believe?', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 36 (2008).

²⁹ O'Neill, 'What Should Egalitarians Believe?', pp. 121-123.

³⁰ O'Neill, 'What Should Egalitarians Believe?', p. 130.

³¹ O'Neill, 'What Should Egalitarians Believe?', p. 132.

5 Inequalities with Respect to which Things Matter?

By attending to the six egalitarian objectives listed in the last section, one can categorize the differences among people with which egalitarians are concerned. If this account of why equality matters is correct, then egalitarians care about inequalities in the following five categories:³²

1. *Crucial resources and life prospects*—especially to show equal respect, and to sustain self-respect. For an example of what it means to have a smaller share of crucial resources and worse prospects, consider the difference in expectations between children born to poor parents and children born to rich parents in the United States. Although poor children are also deprived with respect to socially provided benefits, burdens, and day-to-day opportunities, the largest differences are with respect to the resources and prospects that their families and communities provide. What makes these inequalities disturbing to egalitarians are mainly that they fail to embody equal respect and that they tend to undermine self-respect.
2. *Social status*—especially to protect equal respect and avoid stigmatization, to sustain self-respect and avoid servility and to foster fraternity. Those whose status is low typically also have lesser shares of crucial resources and worse life prospects, and they often receive the short end of the stick with respect to benefits provided by the state. But if we try to imagine the separate consequences of social status, it is easy to see that it bears heavily on equal respect. Indeed large status differences lead to stigmatization and servility. Status differences have some bearing on solidarity as well, though the story is complicated.
3. *Socially provided benefits, burdens, and opportunities*—especially to avoid unfairness and to show equal respect. For example, as documented poignantly by Jonathan Kozol, educational resources allocated to poor children in the United States are far inferior to those allocated to rich children.³³ In every regard—teachers, facilities, educational materials, class size, administration, and morale, schools for poor children are worlds apart from schools for rich children. These inequalities are objectionable primarily because they are unfair, though in this specific example, it is possible to object on other egalitarian grounds.

³² Egalitarians also, of course, object to inequalities in rights, but we shall assume that an insistence on equal rights is common ground between egalitarians and non-egalitarians.

³³ See Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992).

4. *Socially valued possessions, including in particular wealth*—especially to avoid undermining self-respect and fraternity, to protect the impartiality of social institutions, and to avoid subjugation. When the wealthiest 1% of the population has more than five times as much wealth as the total owned by the bottom half of the wealth distribution,³⁴ society is torn apart. The foundation for fraternity in common activities, worries, and modes of life are missing. The rich can buy politicians and judges. Although concentration of wealth in a small group will not undermine people’s self-respect, extreme poverty (which is also to be found in the United States) will.
5. *Political influence*—especially to protect the impartiality of social institutions, to show equal respect, to protect self-respect, and to avoid subjugation. In the context of the United States there are two egregious examples of inequalities in political influence. First, there is the political influence of the wealthy, which we already touched upon. Second, there are the inequalities in political influence between Whites and African Americans in the era of Jim Crow, when African Americans were disenfranchised in the American South. The inequality in influence obviously indicated and perpetuated the domination of African Americans by Whites, but it also undermined the impartiality of social institutions, indicated and caused African Americans to be treated as second-class citizens, and damaged their self-respect.

The massive inequalities between African Americans and Whites are obviously not just matters of political influence, and indeed it seems to be generally the case that very large inequalities will rarely be confined to just prospects, status, socially provided advantages, wealth, or political influence. But the egalitarian’s objection to “Whites Only” bathrooms is distinct from his or her objections to depriving African Americans of the vote or to discrimination in hiring.

In our view, there is no “X” that egalitarians all want to equalize. Instead these five categories of goods span the dimensions within which inequalities are of greater or lesser importance to different egalitarians. Egalitarians are concerned about inequalities with respect to the goods that are relevant to their moral concerns—the goods that bear significantly on life prospects, social status, socially provided benefits, burdens and opportunities, socially valued possessions, or political influence. The goods whose distribution are of

³⁴ An estimate for 2004 by Arthur B. Kennickell, on behalf of the Federal Reserve Board. See <http://www.wealthandwant.com/issues/wealth/50-40-5-4-1.htm>.

concern to egalitarians thus include central prudential goods such as accomplishment, autonomy, understanding, enjoyment, friendship, self-respect, or virtue as well as crucial means toward securing those goods such as health, wealth, education, and political liberties.³⁵ *But what matters is not some overall measure of inequalities among these goods.* What matters are the six considerations mentioned above: fairness, impartiality, self-respect, showing equal respect, fraternity, and avoiding domination.

We have avoided commenting directly on the disagreements among egalitarians concerning what to equalize. In the “equality of what?” literature that grew out of Ronald Dworkin’s seminal argument for equality of resources and against equality of welfare,³⁶ egalitarians defended equalizing opportunity for welfare,³⁷ “access to advantage,”³⁸ capabilities³⁹, and socially determined functionings⁴⁰, in addition to resources and undeserved welfare.⁴¹ In response to this literature, others have emphasized egalitarian concerns with oppression and political inequalities⁴² or more pluralistic views.⁴³

Most of the equality-of-what literature begins by assuming that the goal of egalitarianism is equalizing X , and that the philosophical problem is to clarify what X is. In our view, in contrast, egalitarians have a variety of moral objectives,⁴⁴ and while pursuing them requires lessening existing inequalities, these objectives typically do not require complete equalization. Though there is a persuasive case to be made for equality of moral standing and consequently

³⁵ See Griffin, *Well-Being*.

³⁶ See Dworkin, ‘What is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare’ and ‘What is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources.’

³⁷ See Arneson, ‘Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare.’

³⁸ See Cohen, ‘On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice’ and ‘Equality of What? On Welfare, Goods, and Capabilities’ in M. Nussbaum and A. Sen (eds.) *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

³⁹ See Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*.

⁴⁰ See Marc Fleurbaey, ‘Equal Opportunity for Equal Social Outcome,’ *Economics and Philosophy* 10 (1995).

⁴¹ See Temkin, *Inequality* and ‘Egalitarianism Defended.’

⁴² See Anderson, ‘What Is the Point of Equality?’ and Scheffler, ‘What is Egalitarianism?’

⁴³ See David Miller and Michael Walzer, *Pluralism, Justice, and Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁴⁴ We agree with Scheffler’s objection to those egalitarians who “begin from the premise that there is some currency that should be distributed equally and then proceed to investigate what that currency might be.” As Scheffler goes on to maintain, “Any form of distributive egalitarianism, if it is to be at all plausible, must be anchored in some general conception of equality as a moral value or normative ideal” (‘What is Egalitarianism?’, p. 31). But, unlike Scheffler and O’Neill (whose views we discuss in the next paragraph), we emphasize that the aspects of what Scheffler calls “a society of equals” are separable and that egalitarianism is consequently a family of related concerns.

equality of basic rights and liberties, the ultimate ends of egalitarians should be to lessen inequalities that stand in the way of the six basic egalitarian objectives.

Despite initial similarities, our view thus diverges significantly from O'Neill's non-intrinsic egalitarianism. He writes,

There is a sense, therefore, in which the Non-Intrinsic egalitarian considerations (b)–(f) fit together as a unified whole. They share a common underlying basis in a particular kind of egalitarian vision of how people might live together as equals. Our concern with each of the considerations (b)–(f) is, therefore, a concern with each of a number of ways in which that egalitarian ideal might fail to be realized.⁴⁵

In O'Neill's view, the five concerns⁴⁶ that he identifies as motivating egalitarians form a unified package. The egalitarian ideal is a state of affairs characterized by self-respect and fraternity and free of domination, servility, and stigmatizing differences in status. What links such a state of affairs to equality is "a deep social fact that we can realize the values embedded in the egalitarian considerations (b)–(f) only where substantial inequalities of condition have been eliminated."⁴⁷

Although we see affinities among the separate concerns that drive egalitarians, there are no entailments among the concerns. Egalitarians can buy the whole package as O'Neill urges, but they do not need to. When we said in the previous section that what makes someone an egalitarian is caring about the objectives we described, we did not mean to insist that egalitarians care about all of these objectives or weight them equally. Some egalitarians might be driven mainly by a concern for fraternity, while other egalitarians might be concerned mainly about avoiding domination, with little interest in fraternity. Although an egalitarian may accept O'Neill's ideal and be deeply concerned about all of the factors O'Neill lists, someone with an overriding concern to avoid oppression also counts as an egalitarian, even if she has little concern about servility. Once one recognizes that egalitarians have a multiplicity of objectives, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that there can be a multiplicity of egalitarian positions.

Caring only about fairness, impartiality, fraternity, or equal respect is probably not enough to make one an egalitarian. There are too many ambiguities in these objectives and too many non-egalitarian reasons to be concerned

⁴⁵ O'Neill, 'What Should Egalitarians Believe?', pp. 128-129.

⁴⁶ They are: (b) stigmatizing differences in status, (c) domination, (d) weakening self-respect, (e) servility, and (f) undermining fraternity.

⁴⁷ O'Neill, 'What Should Egalitarians Believe?', p. 131.

about them. On the other hand, someone who is concerned that people should not dominate one another but not particularly concerned about any of the other objectives would be a kind of egalitarian. There is no quantitative criterion specifying how many of which of these objectives someone must endorse to count as an egalitarian. One needs to look at the substance of the objectives someone endorses and the ideals implicit in them to determine whether the position is egalitarian or not. But we see no way to defend O'Neill's requirement that egalitarians object to inequalities for all of the reasons that he lists.

In addition, once one recognizes that inequalities with respect to different categories of advantages are relevant to different egalitarian objectives, one should have qualms about O'Neill's "deep social fact." For example, moderate inequalities of wealth do not undermine fraternity or lead to subservience, while relatively small inequalities in crucial resources and opportunities often do. Inequalities in social status breed servility and undermine self-respect, but they have little bearing on the extent to which some people can dominate others.

In response, O'Neill and others might argue, as Scheffler and Anderson do, that egalitarianism aims at a society of equals—at equality as a relationship among people. Such a society and such a relationship requires attention to all the factors O'Neill and we mention: fair and impartial treatment of individuals, non-subservience, mutual respect, and the elimination of socially controllable barriers to fraternity or self-respect. Egalitarians must demand the whole package. This doesn't require complete equality, because when inequalities no longer stand in the way of the six fundamental egalitarian concerns, they are no longer objectionable. But it does require attention to each of the six egalitarian objectives and hence to inequalities in all five of the categories of advantages.

Although this sounds persuasive, it trades on the vagueness of the notion of a society of equals. Egalitarians need not all place the same weight on the different objectives that condemn inequalities along the separate dimensions (of crucial resources and opportunities, social status, socially provided benefits, social valued possessions, and political influence). Egalitarianism is a family of positions rather than a single view.

This claim about the logic of the egalitarian's concerns finds additional support in the variety of egalitarian positions philosophers have in fact defended. Dworkin is primarily concerned, in his own words with "treating people as equals." His emphasis is accordingly on fairness, impartiality, and equal respect. Cohen is more concerned about self-respect, solidarity, and fairness. Anderson's focus is on avoiding domination. Many members of the

family of egalitarian positions will be complementary, while others will conflict. Few are fully articulated and fully justified. In a world like ours with such enormous inequalities, egalitarians of different stripes will be in fundamental agreement; and indeed beneficent non-egalitarians can readily join those pressing for greater equality. But in a world of greater equality, egalitarians would disagree about how to prioritize different inequalities and about how much equality is enough to respond to the moral concerns underlying egalitarianism. Articulating specific egalitarian positions in ways that fully satisfies the demands specified above in section 2 is a very difficult task.

6 Conclusions: The Place of Egalitarianism within Moral Philosophy

Let us return to the four challenges for egalitarian theory presented in section 2 and see to what extent the view defended here responds to them. Since egalitarianism is, we maintain, a family of related views, different things need to be said about how different egalitarian family members meet the challenges.

1. All varieties of non-fundamentalist egalitarianism criticize inequalities (with respect to specific sorts of good) as symptoms and causes of the evils and wrongs of unfairness, partiality, diminished self-respect, stigmatization and disrespect, diminished fraternity, or domination. But are these egalitarian concerns any easier to justify than a concern for equality itself? Providing this justification is a large task and beyond the scope of this essay, but progress has been made, since there is an intelligible relationship between these six basic egalitarian concerns and the interests of agents who have the moral powers that constitute the basis for equality. For example, if, as Rawls maintains, (most) people are equal by virtue of possessing to some minimal level the two fundamental moral powers of possessing a capacity for a sense of justice and for a conception of the good, then one can ask what one's moral theory implies is due to them, and the non-fundamentalist egalitarian can (or so one hopes) argue that possessors of these moral powers should not dominate one another, or that the state should distribute benefits to them equally or that such agents should not be servile. Whether such egalitarian conclusions actually follow is a long story that we cannot tell here, but unlike the fundamentalist, the non-fundamentalist egalitarian does not just conjure up her position from some intuitive hat.

2. Because the moral concerns animating non-fundamentalist egalitarians differ, egalitarians do not always agree on which things should be distributed more equally. Those concerned about avoiding domination and subjugation will be interested in the distribution of political power and crucial resources and opportunities, while those concerned about fraternity will be more concerned about consumption goods and status. Furthermore, the moral concerns that lead egalitarians to condemn current inequalities do not require them to favor complete equality.
3. The story non-fundamentalist egalitarians will tell concerning the role of responsibility will depend on which of the different egalitarian concerns carries the most weight. Those who emphasize fairness will like Dworkin place considerable weight on responsibility, while those who are concerned about avoiding subjugation like Anderson will be less concerned about whether individuals bear responsibility for inequalities in political power.
4. Finally, the weighting of egalitarian versus non-egalitarian concerns is no easy task for non-fundamentalist egalitarians. But non-fundamentalist egalitarianism provides scope for argument concerning these weights. For the interests of those the egalitarian takes to be equals is the ultimate concern. Whether, for example, some increase in welfare justifies some measure of subordination has no easy answer, but at least one can think about how welfare and subordination bear on people's interests rather than (as is the case with fundamentalist egalitarianism) attempting to adjudicate between completely orthogonal considerations.

We have argued against interpreting egalitarianism as the view that what ultimately matters is equality among people with respect to some factor *X*. In our view, which to some extent resembles O'Neill's non-intrinsic egalitarianism, there are at least six different egalitarian considerations—to avoid unfairness, to protect impartiality, to sustain self-respect, to show equal respect, to nurture fraternity, and to prevent domination. Unlike O'Neill, we argued these considerations lead to concerns about inequalities with respect to different advantages and burdens, which we divided into five categories: crucial resources and life prospects, social status, socially provided benefits, burdens and opportunities, socially valued possessions, and political influence.

If the inequalities that characterize societies were not so large and pervasive, both the differences among egalitarians and the hollowness of the intuitive condemnation of inequality itself would be more obvious. Given the grim current prospects of egalitarian projects, adjudicating among competing

egalitarian positions is unlikely to be of practical importance for a long time to come. But recognizing and emphasizing the range of considerations that drive egalitarians, instead of relying on an untenable intuitive appeal to the intrinsic badness of inequality, should place egalitarianism on a stronger footing.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Section 3 derives from unpublished work of Matt Waldren, while sections 1 and 4 derive from Chapter 11 of *Economic Analysis, Moral Philosophy, and Public Policy* by Daniel Hausman and Michael McPherson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). We would also like to thank Harry Brighouse for his advice and assistance.