The Equality Objection

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The Equality Objection

Some argue that utilitarianism conflicts with the ideal of equality. Suppose, for example, that you could choose between two possible distributions of well-being, Equality and Inequality: Equality has 1,000 people at well-being level 45, while Inequality has 500 people at 80 well-being and another 500 people at 20 well-being.

By the lights of utilitarianism, only the sum total of well-being determines the goodness of an outcome: it does not matter how that well-being is distributed across people. Since the sum total of

well-being is greater in Inequality than in Equality, the unequal outcome is preferable according to utilitarianism.

Some philosophers object to the utilitarian view regarding this choice, claiming that the equal distribution of well-being in Equality provides a reason to choose this outcome. On this view, total well-being is not all that matters; equality of distribution also matters. Equality, it is claimed, is an important moral consideration that the utilitarian overlooks.

Proponents of utilitarianism might respond to this objection in four ways. We will go through these in turn.

Accommodating the Intuition

The first response to this objection is to point out that utilitarians accept that equality is an extremely important guiding concept in our everyday decision making. The difference is merely that utilitarians value equality because of its instrumental benefits, rather than because it is intrinsically important.

Utilitarians care deeply about equality largely because most goods exhibit *diminishing marginal utility*. This means that the more an individual already has of a particular good, such as money or nice clothes, the less they benefit from having even more of it. This provides a strong instrumental reason for utilitarians to care about equality in distributing goods. The diminishing marginal utility of goods implies that we can often increase overall well-being by redistributing from the haves to the have-nots. Also, excessive inequality between people may cause social conflict and harm society in the long run. This provides an additional reason to prefer equal distributions of wealth among people.

As a practical matter, many utilitarians use their time and money to improve the lives of the most disadvantaged, trying to create a more equitable world for all.

Debunking the Intuition

A second response to the objection is to argue that since equality is instrumentally good, perhaps we get confused into thinking it is good in and of itself. A utilitarian might argue that these moral concepts are so valuable for society that we should cultivate strong character dispositions and social norms to endorse, protect and promote them. Therefore, our intuition against particular inequitable outcomes may just result from us having embraced a general moral norm in favor of equality. While our intuitions in favor of equitable outcomes generally increase well-being, they fail when the best achievable outcome is inequitable.

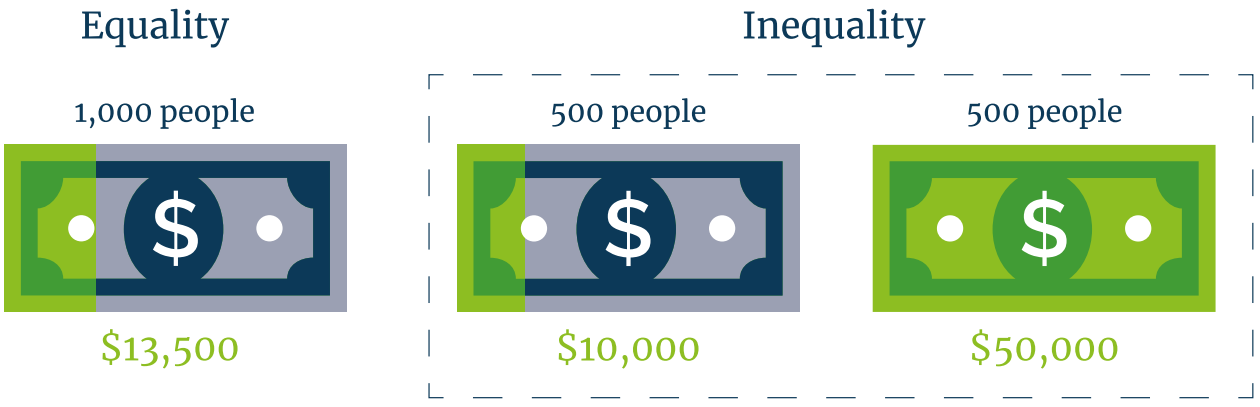
Furthermore, a utilitarian might argue that our intuitions in the choice between Equality and Inequality may be unreliable since we are not used to comparing outcomes directly in the well-being of the individuals involved in them. Moral psychologist Joshua Greene argues that people find

it difficult to reason quantitatively about well-being, since they confuse well-being with physical goods. Greene writes:

> We're used to quantifying stuff, things out in the world, or features of things in the world: How many apples? How much water?... How much money? But we don't ordinarily quantify the quality of our experiences. And thus, when we imagine possible distributions of [well-being]... it's very hard not to think of distributions of stuff, rather than distributions of experiential quality. [1]

This confusion that Greene describes may mislead our intuitions in the choice between Equality and Inequality because we are intuitively used to thinking about goods as having diminishing marginal utility. If the numbers in the hypothetical choice between Equality and Inequality represented levels of goods and not well-being, the utilitarian would choose the equal outcome. However, it would be a mistake to apply this thinking when comparing distributions of well-being, since well-being does not exhibit diminishing marginal utility. By definition, a given unit of well-being is equally valuable to the person to whom it accrues no matter how well-off they are already. So we must consider this in our intuitions.

If we specify the original example in money, and use the standard economic measure of the rate of diminishing returns to money, [2] then we should represent the choice between Equality and Inequality as follows: In Equality 1,000 people get $13,500, while in Inequality 500 people get $10,000 and 500 people get $50,000.



Put in these terms, we think it's no longer intuitively obvious that the utilitarian choice, favoring Inequality over Equality, is the wrong one. Everyone would agree that some level of inequality can be justified by greater total well-being; how exactly to make this trade-off is tricky, and it's not obvious that utilitarianism gets the wrong answer.

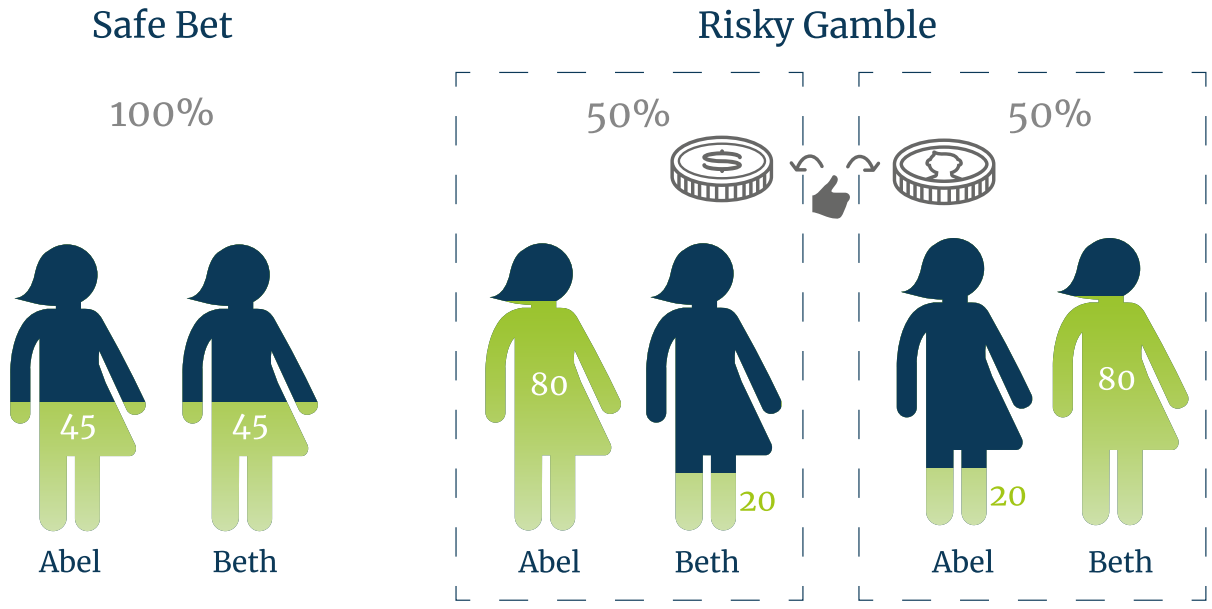
Rivals Fare No Better

The third line of response is to show that rival views have even more counterintuitive implications here. For example, egalitarianism is subject to the *Leveling Down Objection* that it countenances

harming the well-off (without benefiting anyone) since that has the effect of increasing equality.[3] If you don't think that there's anything good about such *leveling down* then your judgment supports the utilitarian view that equality is only valuable instrumentally: valuable when and because it serves to promote overall well-being.[4]

We can also show that the alternatives to the utilitarian distribution of well-being violate a principle called *ex ante Pareto*: that, in a choice between two gambles, if everyone would rationally prefer gamble A to gamble B, then gamble A is better than gamble B.

To see this, suppose that you can choose between one of two options for distributions of well-being, Safe Bet and Risky Gamble: In Safe Bet both Abel and Beth are guaranteed 45 well-being. In Risky Gamble a fair coin is tossed. If it lands heads, Abel receives 80 well-being and Beth receives 20 well-being. If it lands tails, Beth receives 80 well-being and Abel receives 20 well-being.



We can stipulate that both Abel and Beth would rationally prefer Risky Gamble over Safe Bet. They do so because their expected well-being in Risky Gamble is 50 (=(80+20) x 50%), which is higher than the expected well-being in Safe Bet of 45.[5] So, if we follow ex ante Pareto then we should prefer Risky Gamble to Safe Bet. However, Risky Gamble results in an unequal outcome. Those who preferred Equality to Inequality must therefore also prefer Safe Bet to Risky Gamble. They must do so even though doing so is against the best interests of all parties concerned.

This argument has been developed formally by the economist John Harsanyi, who proved it in his utilitarian aggregation theorem.[6]

Biting the Bullet

Finally, proponents of utilitarianism may once again "bite the bullet" and simply accept that utilitarianism sometimes conflicts with our intuitions about equality. These conflicts occur because

the outcomes favored by utilitarianism are those with the highest possible levels of overall well-being, which do not always coincide with the most egalitarian outcomes. Utilitarians will insist that it's better for people overall to be better-off (even if these benefits are not distributed equally) than for them all to share equally in a lower level of well-being.

Next: The Cluelessness Objection

Other Objections to Utilitarianism

How to Cite This Page

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Resources and Further Reading

- Roger Crisp (2003). Equality, Priority, and Compassion. *Ethics*, 113(4): 745–763.
- Toby Ord (2015). A New Counterexample to Prioritarianism. *Utilitas*, 27(3): 298–302.
- Derek Parfit (1997). Equality and Priority. *Ratio*, 10(3): 202–221.
- Larry Temkin (1993). Inequality. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Larry Temkin (2003). Equality, Priority or What?. *Economics and Philosophy*, 19(1): 61–87.

1. Greene, J. (2013). *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them*. New York: The Penguin Press. Chapter 10. ↩
2. Cf. Drupp et al. (2018). Discounting Disentangled. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*. 10(4): 109–134. ↩
3. Parfit, D. (1997). Equality and Priority. *Ratio*,10(3): 202–221. ↩
4. Though this leaves open the choice between the utilitarian's equal consideration of interests and the prioritarian approach of giving extra weight to the interests of the worst off. ↩
5. Indeed, the standard way of defining a magnitude of well-being is in terms of rational decisions in the face of uncertainty. On this account, what it means for an outcome to provide

100 well-being is that one, for example, ought to be indifferent between that outcome and a 50/50 chance of 200 well-being or 0 well-being. ↩

6. Cf. Harsanyi, J. C. (1955). Cardinal welfare, individualistic ethics, and interpersonal comparisons of utility. *The Journal of Political Economy*, pp. 309–321. ↩