

Intergenerational Justice II: Sufficiencyarianism

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Egalitarianism, Prioritarianism, and Sufficiencyarianism

Meyer & Roser are interested in questions of *intergenerational justice*: "Justice considerations are relevant to decisions that are likely to affect the existence, number and identity of future people if—with respect to these decisions—future generations can be viewed as holding *legitimate claims* or *rights* against present generations, who in turn stand under correlative duties to future generations," (p. 219)

Egalitarianism

We have reason to eliminate or reduce relative differences between the benefits that individuals enjoy. We have reason to make things *equal* for its own sake.

The Leveling-down Objection. One way to make things more equal is by making everyone worse off. A distribution in which everyone is equally badly-off is better *in one respect* than one with high but unequal well-being.

- *Question:* Can a distribution be better (in one respect) than another even though it is worse for everyone?

In response to this objection, some people have concluded that Egalitarianism runs together two different considerations: (1) people being more equal, and (2) the badly-off being made better off.

Prioritarianism

Derek Parfit defends the following view, instead:

The Priority View: To benefit persons matters more the worse off the person is to whom the benefits accrue, the more people are being benefited and the greater the benefits in question.

This view avoids the Leveling-down Objection, while tending to promote equality: If X is worse off than Y, we have a reason to promote the well-being of X over the well-being of Y. As a result, we will move to a more equal distribution.

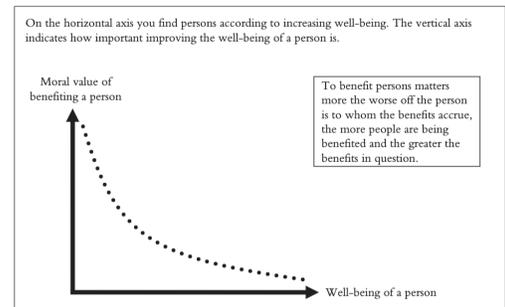
Justice is about *claims* and *rights*.

There are things we could do that might *benefit* future people, but there are further questions to be asked about whether future people have a *claim* or *right* to that benefit.

Meyer, Lukas, and Dominic Roser. (2009) "Enough for the Future." In *Intergenerational Justice*, ed. Axel Gosseries and Lukas H. Meyer. Oxford University Press.

There are two questions we should keep in mind:

1. Equality of *what*?
Resources? Basic goods? Opportunity? Well-being?
2. Equality among *whom*?
Fellow citizens? All presently-existing persons? All persons throughout time?



Sufficientarianism

The Priority View weights the interests of the worse-off over the better-off no matter how well-off everyone is. To some, that's implausible. What matters is whether someone is *badly*-off (in a more absolute than relative sense).

Weak Sufficientarianism: To benefit persons below the threshold matters more the worse off they are. Above the threshold there are no priorities. To benefit persons matters more the more people are being benefited and the greater the benefits in question.

This view avoids the Leveling-down Objection, while promoting equality in a more limited sense: If X is below the threshold and worse off than Y, then it's more important to benefit person X than to benefit person Y.

Strong Sufficientarianism: First, the improvement in well-being of those below the threshold has lexical priority, and benefiting persons below the threshold matters more the worse off they are. Second, both below and above the threshold it matters more to benefit persons the more persons are being benefited and the greater the benefits in question. But: Trade-offs between persons above and below the threshold are precluded.

Meyer & Roser think that the threshold specified by Strong Sufficientarianism can be justified for intergenerational relations.

Intergenerational Sufficientarianism

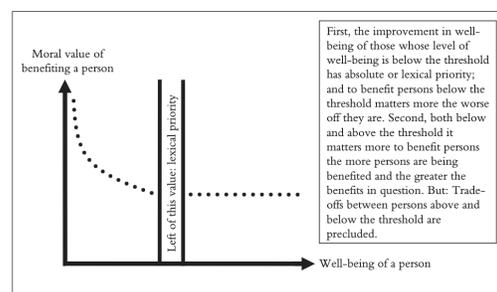
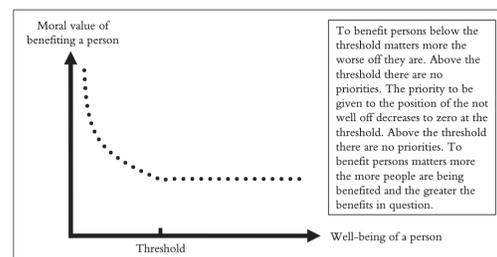
1. *Responding to the Non-Identity Problem.* Meyer & Roser argue that, if there is a threshold, below which we should not let people fall, we can respond to the Non-Identity Problem in the following way. We endorse the following notion of harm:

Normative Account of Harm: Your action harms someone if it makes them worse off than they ought to be.

How well off *ought* one to be? That's specified by the threshold.

2. *It's easier to specify a threshold than a fully universal account of equality.* Equality of what? That might depend on what people value. But specifying a threshold is easier because it is more universal.
3. *The instrumental benefits of equality are irrelevant between generations.* The rich can exercise more control and power over the poor. But this isn't a worry between generations—the future rich cannot exercise any control over the past.

Suppose you can give a benefit to either Elon Musk or to Jeff Bezos, but that's it. Does justice require you to buy the latest copy of Forbes, check which of the two is currently wealthier than the other, and then give the benefit to the one who is less well-off?



What could possibly justify such a threshold? One approach relies on the distinction between *needs* and *wants*. The idea is that we should try to satisfy everyone's needs before trying to satisfy people's wants.

How promising is that approach?