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Introduction to the Symposium on Equality versus Priority

Alex Voorhoeve

This symposium publishes for the first time three key contributions to the debate on the nature and importance of the distinction between egalitarianism (the view that it is in itself bad, when and because it is unfair, for some to be worse off than others) and prioritarianism (the view that each person's utility has diminishing marginal moral value and that the moral value of a person's utility depends only on that person's level of utility, and not on how anyone else fares). These papers were commissioned by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2000. They were intended for publication in a WHO volume which has not yet materialized, and this has hindered access to these important papers. Permission was therefore secured from the WHO to publish them here.¹

Marc Fleurbaey's paper questions the practical significance of the distinction between egalitarianism and prioritarianism. He argues that the prioritarian's ranking of two distributions of final utilities can always be represented by a pluralist egalitarian ranking, which cares about both average utility and inequality. It follows that a prioritarian's choices will always coincide with the choices of a particular kind of egalitarian when the outcomes of these choices are known.

In response, John Broome argues while choices under *certainty* may not reveal a practical difference between the two views, choices under *risk* must do so. Consider the choice between prospect , which entails either (1 util for Ann, 1 for Bob) or (2 for Ann, 2

¹ A fourth important paper commissioned by the WHO, "Equality or Priority in Health Care Distribution?" by Larry Temkin, is not reproduced here because many of its key ideas have subsequently appeared in print, including in this journal. See Temkin (2000, 2003).

for Bob), with equal probability, and prospect , which entails either (1, 2) or (2,1), with equal probability. Both prospects yield the same egalitarian distribution of expected utility. But only ensures equality in final utilities. Therefore, an egalitarian who cares about equality in final utilities should prefer . By contrast, Broome argues, a prioritarian's commitment to valuing each person's situation and prospects separately entails that she will be indifferent between the two prospects. Fleurbaey, in turn, replies that this way of separating egalitarians from prioritarians depends on controversial assumptions about evaluating risky social prospects. Partly in response to Fleurbaey's and Broome's exchange, a literature has developed which looks to risky cases to establish a dividing line between, and assess the plausibility of, versions of egalitarianism and prioritarianism.²

Daniel Hausman rejects the aforementioned versions of egalitarianism and prioritarianism. Instead, he proposes a version of egalitarianism which is grounded in two ideas. First, a humanitarian concern to alleviate suffering and deprivation, widen inadequate opportunities, and remove causes of helplessness and shame. Second, a concern with the social conditions that enable people to become "upright citizens" and that treat such citizens as people who have "no betters," who are possessed of dignity, and who are entitled to impartial and respectful treatment. Hausman's critique of familiar distributive theories and his distinctive outline of an ideal society of equals represent noteworthy contributions to the "civic egalitarian" literature.³

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² See, among others, McCarthy (2008), Otsuka and Voorhoeve (2009), Fleurbaey (2010), Adler (2012, Chap. 7), Bovens (forthcoming), and the contributions to Vol. 24 (2012) of *Utilitas*.

³ See, for example, O'Neill (2008).

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