Priority or Equality for Possible People?\(^1\)

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Abstract

Suppose that you must make choices that may influence the well-being and the identities of the people who will exist, though not the number of people who will exist. How ought you to choose? This paper answers this question. It argues that the currency of distributive ethics in such cases is a combination of an individual’s final well-being and her expected well-being conditional on her existence. It also argues that this currency should be distributed in an egalitarian, rather than a prioritarian, manner.

I

Suppose that you are a morally motivated stranger who must make choices that may influence the well-being and the identities of the people who will exist, though not the number of people who will exist. How ought you to choose? This paper addresses this question.

By way of introduction, consider the following case.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) This paper was presented at Carnegie Mellon, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the National Institutes of Health, Oxford, Princeton, Stockholm University, the University of Amsterdam, and Warwick. We thank those audiences and Richard Bradley, Susanne Burri, Benjamin Ferguson, Silvia Milano, Joseph Millum, Michael Otsuka, Fabienne Peter, Wlodek Rabinowicz, Tom Rowe, Richard Rowland, Hlynur Orri Stefansson, Patrick Tomlin, Peter Vallentyne, and two referees for comments. Alex Voorhoeve is grateful for a Faculty Fellowship of the Princeton University Center for Human Values and for support from the British Arts and Humanities Research Council through grant AH/J006033/1.
**Interpersonal, Non-Identity Case:** Either Ann or Bob will come into existence. Both are equally likely to exist. Their chances of existing are independent of your actions. Unless you intervene, the well-being of whoever exists will be low. You can improve the life of whoever exists by choosing one of the prospects described in Table 1. ($S1$ and $S2$ are states of the world; the numbers in brackets are these states’ probabilities. Non-existence is represented by an empty column.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prospect</th>
<th>$S1$ (0.5)</th>
<th>$S2$ (0.5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ann Bob</td>
<td>Ann Bob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospect A</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospect B</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Considering Ann and Bob’s potential fates in isolation from how anyone else fares, how should you choose? To us, it is clear that you ought to choose prospect A. It is more important to try to provide Ann with the additional benefit of existing at well-being level 60 (which we stipulate is a moderately good quality of life) rather than at 40 (a merely okay life) than try to provide Bob with the additional benefit of existing at 80 (a very good life) rather than 60, because the former would improve Ann’s well-being from a lower level. In this paper, we attempt to find a view that justifies this verdict, that yields acceptable answers in

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other cases, and that has a plausible rationale in respect for both the unity of the individual and the separateness of persons.

In order to do so, we tackle two central questions in the ethics of distribution. The first is: what is the “currency of distributive ethics” (the object of distributive concern)? We will argue that this currency has two components: final well-being and expected well-being conditional on a person’s existence. The importance of the latter has not been previously recognized.

The second question is: how ought one to distribute this currency? The Interpersonal, Non-Identity Case challenges two familiar answers to this question. It poses a problem for utilitarianism, because this view cannot accommodate the judgment that one ought to choose A. More strikingly, it poses a challenge to a common egalitarian view.³ On this view, it is bad that some individuals who have existed, currently exist, or will exist are worse off than others (through no choice or fault of theirs).⁴ But in this case, no such inequality obtains, since of the possible individuals whose fate we are considering, only one will ever exist. We cannot therefore appeal to the badness of such inequality to justify choosing A.

By contrast, prioritarianism, according to which an increment in an individual’s well-being matters more the lower the level of well-being from which this increment takes place, readily arrives at the right answer. On this view, you should choose A because the potential increase in Ann’s well-being from 40 to 60 has greater value than the potential increase in Bob’s well-being from 60 to 80.

In the battle between two leading alternatives to utilitarianism—egalitarianism and prioritarianism—this case therefore seems to strike a blow for prioritarianism. We will argue, however, that there is an egalitarian view which arrives at the right conclusion in this and other cases and which has two merits that prioritarianism lacks. First, it fully respects the unity of the person. Second, it is rightly more willing to accept a costly transfer (one that involves some loss in expected total well-being) to a person with worse prospects the more this transfer reduces inequality.

Before proceeding, a comment on some of our assumptions will be helpful. Throughout, we assume that orthodox decision theory applies, according to which under risk, one ought to maximize the expectation of the value with which one is concerned. We also assume a cardinal, interpersonally comparable measure of well-being, or prudential value, derived from idealized preferences satisfying the Von Neumann-Morgenstern axioms. On this measure, a prospect has higher expected well-being for a person just in case it would be preferred for that person’s sake after rational and calm deliberation with all pertinent information while attending to his self-interest only. One prospect has the same expected well-being as another for a person just in case such deliberation would yield indifference between the two prospects.5

Furthermore, we stipulate that well-being level 0 is a quality of life such that, from the perspective of the idealised preferences of a person living that life, it is a matter of

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5 This measure does not presuppose any particular view on what well-being is. One might maintain that well-being consists of something other than preference satisfaction and hold that the specified idealized preferences fully track the magnitude of this other thing. See Michael Otsuka and Alex Voorhoeve, “Why It Matters that Some Are Worse Off than Others,” Philosophy and Public Affairs 37 (2009): 171-99, on 172-3n3.
indifference that he lives that life or never existed.\textsuperscript{6} A life with positive well-being is one that the person who lives it prefers to never existing; a life with negative well-being is one that he disprefers to never existing. We also stipulate that 100 is an excellent life.

Finally, we assume that the distributor’s actions will never lower anyone’s well-being compared to a baseline of inaction (without the distributor’s intervention, the well-being of whoever exists will be low; the distributor’s choices may improve their prospects). We also stipulate that all lives that might come about have positive well-being. We do so in order to focus solely on the distribution of chances of benefits and goods, rather than having to balance them against risks of harms or evils, which a decision-maker may have special reason to avoid.\textsuperscript{7}

This paper is organised as follows. Section II draws on recent work in distributive ethics to develop the most plausible version of prioritarianism for risky, fixed-identity cases. Section III does so for egalitarianism. These sections conclude that the most plausible version of each takes the object of distributive concern to be a hybrid of final and expected well-being. Sections IV and V consider different ways of extending these hybrid views to risky, fixed-number, non-identity cases. They conclude that in such cases, the currency of distributive ethics is a hybrid of an individual’s final well-being and her expected well-being conditional on her existence. Section VI argues that egalitarianism for this currency is superior to prioritarianism. Section VII concludes.

\textsuperscript{6} In this, we follow Matthew W. Adler, \textit{Well-Being and Fair Distribution} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 219-20.

\textsuperscript{7} These reasons are not captured by standard forms of prioritarianism or egalitarianism, which do not recognize a moral asymmetry between failing to promote a person’s interests and actively setting back their interests.
In conditions of certainty, the prioritarianism we consider is based on the following three ideas.

(Diminishing Marginal Value:) Increments in a person’s well-being have positive but diminishing marginal moral value—an increment that takes places from a lower level receives a higher “priority weight” than an increment that takes place from a higher level;

(Separability:) The moral value of an increment in a person’s well-being depends only on his level of well-being and not on how anyone else fares; and

(Maximization:) We ought to maximize the sum-total of moral value, which is the sum of priority-weighted well-being. 

How should we extend this view to risky contexts? One approach is to take final well-being alone to be the currency of distributive ethics. Such “final well-being prioritarianism” maximizes the expected sum of priority-weighted final well-being. The following Intra-versus Interpersonal Case shows that this approach is problematic, however. This case contrasts two scenarios.

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8 See Derek Parfit, “Equality or Priority?” in The Ideal of Equality, ed. M. Clayton and A. Williams (Basingstoke, 2002), 81–125, on 104-05 and Adler, Well-Being and Fair Distribution. We do not discuss an interesting alternative form of prioritarianism proposed by Andrew Williams, “The Priority View Bites the Dust?” Utilitas 24 (2012): 315-31, which violates Separability.

9 This form of prioritarianism is proposed in Wlodek Rabinowicz, “Prioritarianism for Prospects,” Utilitas 14 (2002): 2–21 and Adler, Well-Being and Fair Distribution.

**Intrapersonal Scenario:** In this scenario, you must choose between A and B (Intrapersonal) outlined in Table 2 \((d > 0)\).

**Interpersonal Scenario:** In this scenario, you must choose between A and B (Interpersonal) outlined in Table 2 \((d > 0)\).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(S1) (0.5)</th>
<th>(S2) (0.5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chelsey</td>
<td>Dave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospect A</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospect B</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Intrapersonal)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospect B</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Interpersonal)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Intrapersonal Scenario, only Chelsey’s well-being is at stake in the choice between A and B. The latter exposes Chelsey to a risk of ending up less well off than she might, but also gives her a chance of ending up much better off than she otherwise would. Since \(d\) is positive, B maximizes Chelsey’s expected well-being. Given our assumptions, someone solely concerned with Chelsey’s interests would therefore prefer B. This means that no matter how things turn out, if you were to choose B, you would be able to offer her the
following prudential justification: “I did the best I could for you, given the information I had at the time.” This provides you with a strong reason to choose B.\footnote{We do not assume that this is a decisive reason. Indeed, in our view, the inequality present in this case means that for some sufficiently small \(d\), one ought to choose option A. See Section III for discussion.}

In contrast, in the Interpersonal Scenario, there is a conflict of interest between Chelsey and Dave. Choosing B would give Dave a chance at a gain at Chelsey’s expense, while making her worse off than Dave for sure.

These differences between these scenarios matter. For any given positive \(d\), it is easier to justify exposing Chelsey to a 50% chance of doing less well than she might for the sake of giving her a 50% chance at a great benefit than it is to justify exposing Chelsey to a 50% chance of doing less well than she might for the sake of giving Dave a 50% chance at a great benefit, thereby ensuring that he will be better off than her no matter what happens. There will therefore be some \(d\) for which B is permissible in the Intrapersonal Scenario but for which B is not permissible in the Interpersonal Scenario.

Final well-being prioritarianism cannot account for this difference in justifiability. The anonymized distribution of final well-being under B is the same in either scenario—there is either (in \(S1\)), one person at 40 and one at 60, or (in \(S2\)), one person at 60 and one at 80 + \(d\). It follows that, on this view, for every \(d\) for which B is at least as good as A in the Intrapersonal Scenario, B is also at least as good as A in the Interpersonal Scenario. In failing to accommodate the difference in justifiability between the risky options in these scenarios, final well-being prioritarianism fails to respect the difference between the unity of the individual (which gives us reason to make purely intrapersonal trade-offs for a person’s sake) and the separateness of persons (which requires that in interpersonal trade-offs, we give greater weight to the interests of the worse off).
A different version of prioritarianism avoids this objection. It gives priority to those with lower expected well-being rather than to those with lower final well-being, when these two differ. Such “expected well-being prioritarianism” maximizes the sum of priority-weighted expected well-being. In intrapersonal trade-offs, it requires maximizing expected well-being; in interpersonal trade-offs, it gives priority to whoever has lower expected well-being. It therefore requires choosing B for every positive $d$ in the Intrapersonal Scenario, but also holds that for some sufficiently small, positive $d$, you ought not to choose B in the Interpersonal Scenario. It therefore recognizes the difference in the justifiability of these prospects.

However, the Inversely Correlated Case described in Table 3 illustrates that expected well-being does not exhaust the currency of prioritarian ethics.

### Table 3. Final well-being in the Inversely Correlated Case.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prospect</th>
<th>$S1$ (0.5)</th>
<th>$S2$ (0.5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Edie</td>
<td>Fred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospect A</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospect B</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both prospects give Edie and Fred the same expected well-being. Expected well-being prioritarianism is therefore indifferent between them. By contrast, it is clear to us that you ought to make the life of whoever ends up worst off as good as possible in this case, in which this can be accomplished without loss in total well-being. One way of arriving at this conclusion is to note that while there are no conflicts of interest in expected well-being in this case, there are conflicts of interest in terms of final well-being. In $S1$, A is in Edie’s final well-
being interest, while B is in Fred’s. In S2, A is in Fred’s final well-being interest, while B is in Edie’s. In this interpersonal trade-off in final well-being, we submit that the separateness of persons gives you reason to assign extra importance to improving the fate of the less well-off person.12

Together, the Intra- versus Interpersonal Case and the Inversely Correlated Case suggest that prioritarians should be concerned with both expected and final well-being.13 How a person ends up faring matters simply because this is how well her life goes. Her prospects matter because they determine how things look from the perspective of her interests at the moment of decision. Note that we assume that a chance at a benefit that does not come good leaves her no better off than she would have been without this chance. But what remains the case even if this chance comes to nought is that, given the information available to the decision-maker, at the moment of decision, the interests of the person who had this chance were advanced by it.

How important are the respective contributions of expected and final well-being to the currency of distributive ethics? To answer this question, consider the Expected versus Final Well-being Case outlined in Table 4, with $20 > d > 0$.

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Table 4. Final Well-being for the Expected versus Final Well-being Case.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>S1 (0.5)</th>
<th>S2 (0.5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>Herb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospect A</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospect B</td>
<td>80 – d</td>
<td>40 + d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>Herb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>80 – d</td>
<td>40 + d</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For $20 > d > 0$, this is a choice between improving the distribution of expected well-being by choosing A (under which each person’s expected well-being is 60) and improving the distribution of final well-being by choosing B (under which Gina’s expected well-being is $80 – d$ and Herb’s is $40 + d$). For a very small, positive $d$, B is much worse as regards the distribution of expected well-being and only somewhat better as regards the distribution of final well-being. For a very small, positive $d$, we submit that one therefore ought to prefer A. As $d$ increases, the situation of the worst off in terms of both expected and final well-being in B improves. Moreover, this improvement takes place without loss in total well-being, so that it represents an unambiguous improvement from a prioritarian perspective.\(^\text{14}\) As $d$ increases, there will therefore be a point at which one should be indifferent between A and B. This point indicates the relative importance of expected and final well-being. If one should be indifferent for a small $d$, then this implies that one should give relatively little weight to expected well-being, since one ought to accept a large worsening in the distribution of expected well-being for the sake of a small improvement in the distribution of final well-being. By contrast, if one should be indifferent only for a large $d$, then this implies that one should give large weight to expected well-being.

\(^{14}\) The same is true, of course, from an egalitarian perspective. This example can therefore also serve to calibrate the form of egalitarianism proposed in Section III.
Intuitively, it strikes us that one ought to be indifferent for a modest $d$—one should give more weight to how well people’s lives truly go than to the quality of their prospects. The resulting form of ‘hybrid’ prioritarianism, which cares for both expected and final well-being while giving greater weight to the latter, is the most plausible prioritarian view because it recognizes a difference between intra- and interpersonal trade-offs. However, it has an important drawback: in cases in which only one person’s well-being is at issue (and inequality is not an issue), it sometimes mandates the choice of an alternative with lower expected well-being for this person.\(^\text{15}\) By way of illustration, consider the One-Person Case outlined in Table 5, where $d > 0$.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
 & S1 (0.5) & S2 (0.5) \\
\hline
Io & Io & \\
\hline
Prospect A & 60 & 60 \\
\hline
Prospect B & 40 & $80 + d$ \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Final well-being for the One-Person Case}
\end{table}

Prospect B uniquely maximizes Io’s expected well-being. Given our assumptions, someone solely concerned with Io’s interests would therefore prefer it. This gives you a strong reason to choose this prospect. Moreover, when you consider her prospects in isolation,\(^\text{15}\) Otsuka, “Prioritarianism and the Measure of Utility,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 23 (2015): 1–22 notes this consequence of hybrid prioritarianism. That final well-being prioritarianism has this implication and that this provides a reason to reject it was first argued by Dennis McKerlie, “Egalitarianism,” *Dialogue* 23 (1984): 223-37, on 235. For concurring judgments, see David McCarthy, “Utilitarianism and Prioritarianism II,” *Economics and Philosophy* 24 (2008): 1–33; Otsuka and Voorhoeve, “Why It Matters;” and Andrew Williams, “The Priority View Bites the Dust?”
you have, in our view, no countervailing reason to choose A. We conclude that it is morally better to choose B.

However, for a sufficiently small, positive $d$, hybrid prioritarianism can mandate A. To see why, consider first a case in which $d = 0$ (contrary to our assumption above). Hybrid prioritarianism then regards A as superior to B, because while they are equal in terms of priority-weighted expected well-being, A is more valuable in terms of expected priority-weighted final well-being. Indeed, if one gives substantial prioritarian weight to improvements at lower levels of final well-being, A will be considerably better than B. Now let $d$ be marginally larger than zero. This gives B a miniscule advantage in terms of expected well-being, but it remains considerably worse than A from the perspective of priority-weighted final well-being. This way in which B is worse therefore outweighs the advantage that B has in terms of priority-weighted expected well-being. Hybrid prioritarianism therefore mandates the choice of A, contrary to Io’s interests.

We regard this as a reason to reject hybrid prioritarianism. This judgment has been much debated. We briefly engage with two common objections to it.\textsuperscript{16} The first is this:

One should be risk-averse in well-being when making decisions on another’s behalf: when comparing a riskless prospect such as A to a risky prospect such as B with a somewhat higher expected well-being for the person but with a chance of ending up worse off, one should favour the former. In giving greater weight to increments in

final well-being that take place from a lower level, hybrid prioritarianism displays such proper risk aversion.\textsuperscript{17}

In reply: the assumption that one ought to be risk-averse in well-being when deciding for another is unsupported.\textsuperscript{18} It may gain some initial plausibility from the judgment that one is warranted in being especially averse to a risk of causing another harm. But while this may provide a reason to be risk averse in everyday cases in which one might do such harm, it fails to give one such reason in our cases, in which one can do no harm. Moreover, we see no other grounds for risk aversion in well-being in our cases. On the measure of well-being here assumed, a person would rationally prefer that which uniquely maximizes her expected well-being. Why should a third party deciding on this person’s fate adopt a different risk attitude than this person would, if ideally rational, adopt on her own behalf?\textsuperscript{19}

The second objection is this:


\textsuperscript{18} Note that an absence of risk aversion in well-being is compatible with (indeed, \textit{demands}) risk aversion in things that contribute to a person’s well-being, such as money. For example, if the latter has diminishing marginal well-being, then someone who maximizes expected well-being will be risk averse in money (e.g., she will prefer $100,000 for sure to a fifty-fifty gamble between $0 and $200,000).

\textsuperscript{19} See Otsuka, “Prioritarianism and the Measure of Utility” for a fuller defence of this view.
Even if it is permissible to maximize Io’s expected well-being when her quality of life will be decent no matter what (as in the One-Person Case), it is not permissible to do so when the risky option involves an especially poor quality of life. Consider a variant of the One-Person Case in which if the decision-maker does not act, Io will have a well-being of 0. If the decision-maker chooses A, Io will have an okay life (a well-being of 40) for certain. If she chooses B, Io faces a fifty-fifty gamble between a life just marginally better than never existing (a well-being of $d$, with $d$ small but positive) and a very good life (80). In this case, one ought to ensure that Io has an okay life and choose A.

In reply: we submit that the proposed judgment that one should choose A trades on something other than prioritarian value. Improving a person’s well-being from a low to an okay level will typically be associated with a greater reduction in suffering than improving her well-being from an okay to a very good level. (Indeed, when one is asked to imagine a life that is just barely worth living, one naturally imagines a life with considerable travails.) If, as some have argued, one has stronger reason to alleviate suffering than to promote well-being in other ways, such as by giving people opportunities to pursue their projects, then this explains why one should typically choose A in this variant of our One-Person Case. We set aside such special reasons to alleviate suffering in this paper in order to focus solely on reasons provided by well-being. In so doing, we do not prejudice our case against prioritarianism, which also focuses only on the moral importance of increases in well-being and is therefore not a view about the relative importance of alleviating suffering and improving happiness. Someone who is badly off may have her well-being augmented by enabling the pursuit of her projects; a well-off person may have it augmented to the same

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extent by the alleviation of her pain. In such cases, prioritarianism will hold that one has more reason to help the former person.\footnote{Cf. Parfit, “Another Defence,” 419-22.}

We have argued that despite its strengths, hybrid prioritarianism fails in our One-Person Case to respect the fact that the two potential futures are both Io’s, so that one can legitimately approach this choice with an eye to her interests alone. In the next section, we develop an egalitarian view that does not have this demerit.

III

The preceding section established that the currency of prioritarian ethics is a combination of expected and final well-being. There are good reasons to take this to be the currency of egalitarianism as well. The basic egalitarian idea is that it is bad because unfair that some are worse off than others in terms of final well-being. The unfairness of such inequality is partly determined by individuals’ chances of ending up worse off than others. To illustrate, consider a case in which one has to distribute a single, indivisible good between two people, each of whom would fare equally poorly without it and equally well with it. The resulting inequality in final well-being between these people, while unfair, will be less unfair when each person has an equal chance to end up better off than when the one who ends up worse off never has such a chance. In receiving this equal chance, what the first person receives is, in terms of her interests as assessed from the standpoint of the distributor, just as valuable as what the second receives. Moreover, from the perspective of someone solely concerned with the interests of any one of these persons (e.g. a guardian) and who has the same knowledge as this distributor, this chance is equivalent to getting half the well-being value of the disputed good for sure.
Because, in these senses, equal chances advance the interests of each person equally, they mitigate (without eliminating)\textsuperscript{22} the unfairness of unequal final well-being in such a case.\textsuperscript{23}

Sensible egalitarians are pluralists—they care about equality and about improving people’s well-being. Here, we will focus on one form of pluralist egalitarianism which has especially attractive properties. This form evaluates every distribution by its “equally-distributed equivalent,” or EDE.\textsuperscript{24} By way of illustration, consider a distribution in which Arnaldur has 40 and Bea 80. Suppose you would be indifferent between this distribution and one in which Arnaldur and Bea each have 50. Then the latter is the equally-distributed equivalent of the former, unequal distribution. When there is inequality to which one is averse, the EDE will be less than the average attainment in the unequal distribution. When a

\textsuperscript{22} We therefore disagree with the proposal in Peter Vallentyne, “Brute Luck, Option Luck, and Equality of Initial Opportunities,” \textit{Ethics} 112 (2002): 529-57 that one should take expected well-being at birth to be the whole of the currency of egalitarian distributive ethics. This proposal has, in our view, implausible implications in the Inversely Correlated Case (in which it is indifferent between A and B) and the Expected versus Final Well-being Case (in which it favours A for every d in the specified range).


distribution contains no inequality, the EDE is simply the uniform attainment in that distribution.

In risky, fixed-identity cases, the EDE tells us to evaluate each prospect as follows. First establish the EDE for each of the possible distributions of our hybrid currency that may result from the choice of the prospect. Then take the probability-weighted sum of these values. A prospect that yields the same, unequal, anonymized distribution of this currency in each state of the world, such as B in the Inversely Correlated Case, is then evaluated by the value of the EDE of this distribution, which will be less than the average attainment. (The EDE therefore favours the egalitarian prospect A in that case.) A risky prospect that contains no inequality, such as B in our One-Person Case (Table 5), is appraised at the expected value of this currency for this person. (In this case, it favours B, since it has a higher expectation.)

In sum, in interpersonal trade-offs, this form of egalitarianism favours the less well off, thereby respecting the separateness of persons. But in intrapersonal trade-offs without inequality, it holds that prudential and moral evaluation converge. It therefore fully respects the unity of the person in such cases.

This form of egalitarianism does well in all cases so far discussed. Nonetheless, it is open to the following objection:

On this view, what one ought to do is, implausibly, affected by the well-being levels of people who have nothing at stake. To illustrate, compare the One-Person Case outlined in Table 5 with the Intrapersonal Scenario outlined in Table 2. In the former, it mandates the risky B for every positive $d$. But in the latter, for some small, positive $d$, it will prohibit choosing B, because this prospect will generate inequality. This is so even though these prospects affect the well-being of the only people who have something at stake (respectively, Io and Chelsey) in an identical manner. The
difference in these verdicts is wholly due to Dave’s appearance in the Intrapersonal Scenario, where his presence generates offending inequality. But Dave’s well-being is unaffected by the choice between A and B. Indeed, we can imagine that Dave died some time ago, so that nothing can disturb the profound security of the well-being he enjoyed. The contrast between these cases therefore highlights the fact that egalitarianism requires the decision-maker to gather information about the well-being of unaffected individuals, including past generations. This is not merely a practical problem. Having decisions depend on the fate of unaffected individuals is also normatively unattractive. Respect for the separateness of persons requires that individuals whose well-being is unaffected by one’s choices do not figure in one’s decision-making; since their well-being is not affected, they have no claim in favour of any of the alternatives. Because, on prioritarian views, the well-being of unaffected parties cannot determine what one ought to do, prioritarian views better respect the separateness of persons.  

In reply: we reject the assumption that the separateness of persons requires that one consider only individuals whose well-being is at stake. The unfairness which concerns egalitarians is essentially about how well some individuals’ lives go in comparison to how well other, separate individuals’ lives go. A situation in which, due to brute luck alone, Arnaldur’s lifetime quality of life is okay and Bea’s is very good is unfair. By contrast, a situation in which, due to luck, for one part his life, Arnaldur has a merely okay quality of life

and for another part of his life, he has a very good quality of life is not unfair in this way. Only in the former situation can Arnaldur legitimately complain of being unfairly disadvantaged vis-à-vis another person.\textsuperscript{26} He has this complaint even when his welfare cannot be improved and even when the better off Bea does not coexist with him. Suppose, for example, that Arnaldur develops a debilitating physical illness about which nothing can be done. Bea will also develop this illness, but because she belongs to a future generation, she will have access to a complete cure. Arnaldur can legitimately complain that this differential access to a cure is one way in which “life is unfair.” As a distributor, one should take into account such unfairness when evaluating alternatives. In so doing, one rightly considers the fate of individuals whose well-being is not at stake.

We have argued that for risky, fixed-identity cases, hybrid egalitarianism is superior to hybrid prioritarianism. However, an assessment of these rival views should also take into account how they fare in risky, fixed-number, non-identity cases. We therefore now take up the task of developing the most plausible versions of prioritarianism and egalitarianism for such cases.

IV

For a possible person who has some chance of never existing, how, if at all, should we value the state in which she never exists? In this section, we consider one answer to this question. We argue that despite its initial appeal, this answer should be rejected.

The approach we consider consists of the following claims. In valuing a possible person’s prospects from the perspective of her interests: (i) a state of the world in which she has a positive level of well-being is better than never existing; (ii) a state of the world in

\textsuperscript{26} For a detailed discussion of such complaints, see Temkin, \textit{Inequality} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
which she has negative well-being is worse than never existing; and (iii) a state of the world in which she doesn’t come into existence is equivalent to her living with a well-being level of 0 (at which she would be indifferent between existing and never existing).

It may appear that it makes no sense to value a possible person’s prospects in this manner. To see why, take a person who enjoys positive well-being. If being is better for her than nothingness, then it might seem to follow that it would have been worse for her if she had never existed. But the latter is regarded by some as an absurdity—if she hadn’t existed, nothing would have been better or worse for her, since she would not have been at all.\(^\text{27}\)

However, this allegedly absurd conclusion does not follow. As Gustaf Arrhenius and Wlodek Rabinowicz argue, a triadic relation between a person, a state in which this person leads a good life, and state in which she never exists holds only if all three relata exist. The states in question are abstract objects and can therefore exist even if they do not actually obtain. But if, as Arrhenius and Rabinowicz assume, a person is a concrete object, then the relation cannot hold if she never exists, since in that case one of the relata does not exist. Therefore, it does not follow from the fact that it is better for her to exist than never to exist that never existing would have been worse for her, since in the latter case one of the relata would have been absent.\(^\text{28}\)

This reasoning establishes that it is coherent to appeal to an existing person’s preferences in order to judge that her existence is better for her than her never existing. We submit that it also makes sense to appeal to how good a state would be for a person if she

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\(^{27}\) See Broome, *Ethics out of Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 186.

were to come into existence in order to now, in anticipation, comparatively evaluate both states in which she exists and states in which she never exists. To motivate this, reflect first on how one would regard the possibility of a person coming into existence with a negative quality of life. Considering only her interests, one should regard this as worse than her never coming into existence—in line with the way she would value it if she were to come into existence. Next, reflect on the possibility of a person coming into existence with a positive quality of life. Considering only her interests, one has reason to regard this existence as good—after all, she would regard her existence as better for herself than never existing.29

The rationale for the approach under discussion, then, is this. Since life at a positive level of well-being is a good and would be better for the person than never existing, the distribution of chances of receiving this good matters morally.30

Given the proposed equivalence of existing at well-being level 0 and never existing, the approach adopts the following general principle for our cases: *ceteris paribus*, one ought to treat a case in which a possible person doesn’t exist in a state of the world just like a case in which this person exists in that state with a well-being level zero.

In the opening Interpersonal, Non-Identity Case, this approach arrives at the correct answer. It regards prospect A as equivalent to a prospect in which either Ann ends up with a final well-being of 60 and Bob with 0 or Ann ends up with 0 and Bob with 60, with both outcomes being equally likely. It regards B as equivalent to a prospect in which either Ann ends up with a final well-being of 40 and Bob with 0 or Ann ends up with 0 and Bob with 80 (with both outcomes being equally likely). A prioritarian who adopts this approach will choose A, since: (a) it improves Ann’s expectations from the equivalent of an expected well-


30 We thank a referee for this way of putting the rationale.
being of 20 to the equivalent of an expected well-being of 30, which it regards as more important than improving Bob’s expectations from the equivalent of an expected well-being of 30 to 40; and (b) it ensures that whoever will exist will have a final well-being of 60, which it regards as more valuable than a fifty-fifty gamble of this person existing at 40 or 80. An egalitarian who adopts this approach will also choose A, because it equalizes the value of Ann’s and Bob’s prospects without a loss in expected total well-being. By regarding non-existence as equivalent to existence with a well-being of zero and thereby being concerned with equality in people’s chances of coming into existence, this approach therefore resolves the challenge to egalitarianism raised in the introduction.

However, the proposed approach yields problematic verdicts in other cases. Consider the Variable Chance of Existence Case outlined in Table 6. In this case, either, with probability $p$, Jane will exist with a well-being level of $70 + d$, or, with probability $1 - p$, Kathy will exist with a well-being of 70, where $d \geq 0$. You must choose the value of $p$.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$1 - p$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Kathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$70 + d$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Final Well-being in the Variable Chance of Existence Case.

We submit that if Jane’s quality of life, were she to exist, would be as good as Kathy’s would be if she were to exist instead ($d = 0$), then it is a matter of indifference which probability you choose. Moreover, if Jane would have a better life than Kathy would have ($d > 0$), then it would be best if you maximized the chance that Jane would come into existence.

Neither a hybrid prioritarian nor a hybrid egalitarian view that takes the approach under consideration, however, can accommodate these judgments. Suppose first that Jane’s
quality of life, if she were to come into existence, would be as good as Kathy’s would be if
she were to exist instead \((d = 0)\). From the perspective of the final well-being components of
prioritarian and egalitarian views, it is then a matter of indifference which \(p\) you choose.
However, from the perspective of the value of each person’s prospects, you ought to choose \(p\)
equals one half. Since, on the proposed approach, never existing is valued at 0, whoever is
less likely to come into existence will be the person with the least valuable prospects. By
raising this person’s probability of existing, you can improve her prospects to the same extent
as you worsen the prospects of the person with the most valuable prospects. Both hybrid
prioritarianism and hybrid egalitarianism will therefore require that you equalize Jane’s and
Kathy’s probabilities of existence.

Now assume that Jane would have a somewhat better life than Kathy would have \((d\) is
positive, but small). On the proposed approach, both hybrid prioritarianism and hybrid
egalitarianism can then require that you nonetheless give Kathy a chance of coming into
existence. To see why, suppose that you give Kathy no such chance. She then has much worse
prospects than Jane: Kathy’s will be equivalent to an expected well-being of 0; Jane’s will be
equivalent to an expected well-being of \(70 + d\). By raising Kathy’s probability of coming into
existence, you improve her prospects from this very low level at a cost of a roughly equally
large reduction in Jane’s prospects from this much higher level. If one gives extra weight to
improving the prospects of the person with worse prospects, for some sufficiently small,
positive \(d\), the optimal value for \(p\) will be less than unity. Indeed, there is good reason to think
that the recommended value of \(p\) will be close to one half. For the proposed approach is
committed to treating this case just like a case in which, with probability \(p\), Jane has a well-
being of \(70 + d\) (with \(d\) small and positive) and Kathy has a well-being of 0 and with
probability \(1 - p\), Jane has 0 and Kathy 70. In the latter case, it is intuitively clear that one
ought to give Jane and Kathy close to an equal chance. After all, if these individuals would
exist for sure, who would deny Kathy such a (roughly) equal chance at this great good? But whereas requiring roughly equal chances at a good life would be plausible if Jane and Kathy were to exist for sure, such a requirement is implausible in the Variable Chance of Existence Case. In that case, it is clearly better to ensure the existence of whoever would have a higher level of well-being.

The following case reveals further problems for the approach to valuing non-existence under consideration.

**Likely versus Unlikely Existence Case:** There are three equally likely states of the world, $S_1$, $S_2$, and $S_3$. Leo exists in (and only in) $S_1$ and $S_2$—he therefore has a high chance of existence. Mick exists in (and only in) $S_3$—he therefore has a low chance of existence. You must choose one of the prospects outlined in Table 7 ($d > 0$).

### Table 7. Final Well-being for the Likely versus Unlikely Existence Case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prospect</th>
<th>$S_1$ (0.33)</th>
<th>$S_2$ (0.33)</th>
<th>$S_3$ (0.33)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leo</td>
<td>Mick</td>
<td>Leo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospect A</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospect B</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50 $- d$</td>
<td>50 $+ d$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this case, it seems to us that for any positive $d$, you should choose A, because doing so attempts to improve Leo’s fortunes from a lower level. However, if never existing is valued at 0, both a hybrid prioritarian and a hybrid egalitarian will hold that for some sufficiently small, positive $d$, you should choose B. For on this approach, Mick’s prospects are far worse than Leo’s, since Mick has a much lower chance of coming into existence. Both a hybrid
prioritarian and a hybrid egalitarian using this approach will therefore conclude that you should choose B in order to compensate Mick for this low chance.

The general problem with the approach under consideration is this. In treating a scenario in which a merely possible individual does not come into existence as akin to a scenario in which this person exists with a zero level of well-being, it ignores the fact that a person who does not come into existence cannot have been wronged. Only people who exist at some time can be wronged by not having their interests properly promoted. Consider again the Variable Chance of Existence Case (Table 6). If one chooses to create Jane for sure \( (p = 1) \), then Kathy will never be wronged, because she will never be. This contrasts sharply with a scenario in which Kathy will exist for sure alongside Jane, but has well-being level 0 with chance \( p \) and a well-being level of 70 with chance \( 1 - p \). In the latter scenario, if one chooses \( p = 1 \), Kathy can rightly object that she was condemned to a life no better than nothingness when she could have instead been given a substantial chance at a good life. By contrast, in the Variable Chance of Existence Case, she cannot make such a complaint if one chooses \( p = 1 \), because she then doesn’t exist.

We submit that this contrast licences the following principle: in evaluating a choice, one should take account of only the well-being of whoever has some positive chance of existing if you make this choice. In the Variable Chance of Existence Case, one therefore should choose to create Jane for sure if her well-being would be greater than Kathy’s would be \( (d > 0) \). Moreover, in evaluating a possible outcome of one’s choice, one should consider only the interests of the people who exist in that outcome. In the Likely versus Unlikely

Existence Case (Table 7), one should not regard Mick as akin to someone who will be around in any case. Instead, one should focus only on how he would fare if he were to come into existence.

V

This suggests the following approach to our risky, non-identity cases: in evaluating each potential outcome, one should consider only how the people who exist in that outcome fare in terms of: (i) their final well-being; and (ii) their expected well-being conditional on their existence. To illustrate, consider again the Likely versus Unlikely Existence Case. If one chooses A and S1 obtains, then the morally relevant considerations are: Leo’s final well-being is 50 and his expected well-being conditional on his existence was 50. If one chooses B and S1 obtains, then Leo’s final well-being is 50 and his expected well-being conditional on his existence was 50 – \(d/2\).\(^{32}\)

It is easy to verify that prioritarianism for this hybrid of final and conditional expected well-being gets all the non-identity cases reviewed so far right. In the Interpersonal, Non-Identity Case (Table 1), it mandates A, since it regards it as more important to improve Ann’s final and conditional expected well-being from 40 to 60 than to improve Bob’s from 60 to 80. (Naturally, in this case, each person’s conditional expected well-being is identical to their final well-being.)

In the Variable Chance of Existence Case (Table 6), it mandates creating Jane for sure whenever she would have a better life than Kathy would have, since this ensures that whoever exists has higher final and conditional expected well-being.

\(^{32}\) Leo exists in and only in S1 and S2, each of which has a probability of 1/3 of obtaining. Under B, his expected well-being conditional on his existence is therefore \(\frac{1/3 \times 50 + 1/3 \times (50 - d)}{2/3} = 50 - d/2\).
In the Likely versus Unlikely Existence Case (Table 7), it regards it as more important to improve Leo’s final well-being in $S_2$ from $50 - d$ to 50 rather than to improve Mick’s final well-being in $S_3$ from 50 to $50 + d$. It also regards it as more important to improve the conditional expected well-being of Leo (who has a two-thirds chance of existing) from $50 - d/2$ to 50 than to improve the conditional expected well-being of Mick (who has a one-third chance of existing) from 50 to $50 + d$. It therefore mandates A.

Matters are less straightforward, however, for a hybrid egalitarianism that evaluates each possible outcome only by how each individual who exists in that outcome fares. As indicated in the introduction, such a view faces a challenge in the Interpersonal, Non-Identity Case. For this form of egalitarianism considers only Ann’s situation in $S_1$ and only Bob’s situation in $S_2$. It does not evaluate Ann’s situation in comparison with Bob’s. This absence of comparative evaluation reflects the absence of the kinds of inequality that concern egalitarians. Since Ann and Bob will not both exist, if you choose B, Ann will not be worse off than Bob; neither will Bob be worse off than Ann. The familiar source of unfairness therefore does not exist in this instance. It follows that the aforementioned fairness-based justification for equality in (conditional) expected well-being among actual individuals—that such equality of chances can mitigate the unfairness of unequal final well-being—cannot be invoked here either. It is therefore in question whether the proposed form of egalitarianism can yield the desired verdict that we should choose A.

Indeed it can, by incorporating a non-egalitarian principle to determine how the two elements of the currency of distributive ethics—final well-being and conditional expected well-being—jointly determine how much a person has of this currency in a particular outcome. Egalitarianism alone is silent about this issue—it says only that one should care about inequalities between individuals in this hybrid currency, but says nothing about how, precisely, these elements contribute to this currency (beyond the obvious point that an
increase in each element increases the amount of the currency a person receives). Pluralist egalitarians can use this degree of freedom to select a principle for combining final and conditional expected well-being into a single measure of the hybrid currency which yields the right answer in the Non-Identity, Interpersonal Trade-off Case. The following principle yields the desired result: conditional expected well-being makes a decreasing marginal contribution to the currency of egalitarian ethics. In other words: the higher an individual’s conditional expected well-being, the less a given increment in his conditional expected well-being adds to the currency he receives. Having okay rather than poor conditional prospects generates a greater increment in this currency than having moderately good rather than merely okay conditional prospects; and having very good rather than moderately good conditional prospects generates less of an increment in this currency than having moderately good rather than merely okay conditional prospects.

If it incorporates this idea, then our pluralist egalitarian view will hold that the value of improving Ann’s conditional expected well-being from 40 to 60 exceeds the value of improving Bob’s conditional expected well-being from 60 to 80, because the former improvement takes place from a lower level. Prospect A is therefore preferred.

In sum, our pluralist egalitarian view arrives at the right conclusion in our opening case if it relies on this “diminishing marginal contribution of conditional expected well-being to the currency of ethics” principle. But one must ask: is this principle defensible? Isn’t an appeal by egalitarians to such a non-egalitarian principle *ad hoc*?

In reply, the proposed “diminishing marginal contribution” principle answers a question that a hybrid conception of the currency of ethics must address, which is how its two elements (conditional expected and final well-being) contribute to an individual’s attainment of this currency. This principle strikes us as embodying an attractive way of doing so. The idea is that being exposed to low conditional expected well-being is especially important.
Being exposed to a poor prospect substantially reduces a person’s attainment of this currency even when, through luck, the person ends up with high final well-being. By contrast, when an individual has high conditional expected well-being, this adds only rather modestly to his attainment of this currency when his final well-being turns out to be low. But our defence of this principle does not rely solely on its seeming attractiveness; it also appeals to its implications in cases and to its fit with still deeper principles. The principle gains some support from the fact that it enables an otherwise appealing egalitarian view to arrive at the right answer in the Interpersonal, Non-Identity Case. As we have seen, it does so not by limiting this egalitarian view, but rather by filling in a blank space in this view. Moreover, it is not an ad hoc, but rather a natural addition to this pluralist, hybrid egalitarian view. For it can be justified by an appeal to the same foundational moral ideal which also justifies the other elements of this pluralist view: respect for the difference between intra- and interpersonal trade-offs. To see why, compare the Interpersonal, Non-Identity Case (Table 1) with a variant of our One-Person Case (Table 5) in which \( d = 0 \), so that both A and B offer equal conditional expected well-being. Under this assumption, both cases have strong similarities. In both cases, only one person will exist. In both cases, if one chooses A, this person will have a final and conditional expected well-being of 60. Moreover, in both cases, if one chooses B, in state of the world \( S1 \), this person will have a final well-being of 40; and in \( S2 \), this person will have a final well-being of 80. The only difference is that, if one chooses B in this variant of the One-Person Case, the person who exists will have a conditional expected well-being of 60 because both potential futures are hers, whereas in the Interpersonal, Non-Identity Case, the person who exists will either have a conditional expected well-being of 40 or a conditional expected well-being of 80 because these potential futures belong to different people. According to the diminishing marginal contribution principle, this difference is significant. Prospect B is permissible in the One-Person Case because it maximizes the
conditional expected well-being of the only person whose well-being is at issue. In contrast, B is impermissible in the Interpersonal, Non-Identity Case because it is more important to raise one possible person’s conditional expected well-being from 40 to 60 than to raise a different possible person’s conditional expected well-being from 60 to 80. This principle therefore marks the difference between intrapersonal trade-offs without inequality (in which it endorses maximizing expected well-being) and interpersonal trade-offs without inequality (in which it gives priority to improving the prospects of the possible person with the worst conditional prospects).

Every element of our proposed pluralist, hybrid egalitarian view therefore has the same deep rationale: respect for both the unity of the individual and the separateness of persons. The unity of the individual gives us reason to maximize a person’s expected well-being. The separateness of persons gives us reason to care about unfair inequality in conditional expected and final well-being. It also gives us reason to improve the prospects of those with lower conditional expected well-being even in the absence of unfair inequality.

VI

The proposed pluralist, hybrid egalitarian view arrives at the right conclusion in all cases so far surveyed. In this, it is superior to hybrid prioritarianism, which fails to fully respect the unity of the individual. In closing, we present one further advantage that this form of egalitarianism has over prioritarianism.

Consider the Costly Equality Case outlined in Table 8, in which \(20 > d > 0\).
Table 8. Final well-being in the Costly Equality Case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nick</th>
<th>Olga</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prospect A</td>
<td>60 – (d)</td>
<td>60 – (d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospect B</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You can achieve equality between Nick and Olga, but doing so is costly in terms of total final and expected well-being. The variable \(d\) represents this cost. Ask yourself for which \(d\) you ought to be indifferent between A and B in this case. This “indifference \(d\)” is the largest cost you should be willing to accept to improve the situation of the worst off.

Now consider the Costly Improvements in Worst Prospects Case outlined in Table 9, in which, again, 20 > \(d\) > 0.

Table 9. Final well-being for the Costly Improvement in Worst Prospects Case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(S1) (0.5)</th>
<th>(S2) (0.5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pia</td>
<td>Rob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospect A</td>
<td>60 – (d)</td>
<td>60 – (d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospect B</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this case, either Pia or Rob will come into existence. Both are equally likely to exist. You can improve the fate of person with the worst conditional expected well-being, but doing so is costly in terms of expected total final and expected well-being. The variable \(d\) represents this cost. Ask yourself for which \(d\) you ought to be indifferent between A and B in this case. This “indifference \(d\)” is the largest cost you should be willing to accept to improve the situation of the person with the lowest expectations.
Should your “indifference \( d \)” in the Costly Equality Case be equal to your “indifference \( d \)” in the Costly Improvement in Worst Prospects Case? We think not. In the former, you can prevent inequality between persons who will both exist. In the latter, there will be no such inequality. We therefore believe that you ought to accept a larger loss in benefiting Nick rather than the coexistent Olga than you ought to be willing to accept in attempting to benefit Pia rather than Rob (who will never exist if Pia does). In deciding whether to engage in a costly transfer to a possible person with worse prospects rather than to a possible person with better prospects, you should allow a larger cost when these people will both exist.

Our egalitarian view concurs. In the Costly Equality Case, it holds that improving the lot of the worst off is important because it reduces inequality in the distribution of final and expected well-being. In the Costly Improvement in Worst Prospects Case, it registers no such egalitarian reason to favour the worst off. It registers only the diminishing marginal contribution of an increment in conditional expected well-being to the distributive currency. It will therefore tolerate a larger loss in the former than in the latter.

By contrast, prioritarian views will not accept a costlier transfer in the former case. On these views, moving someone’s final and conditional expected well-being from 40 to 60 – \( d \) generates as much moral value whether or not there is another, better-off individual, while moving someone’s final and conditional expected well-being from 80 to 60 – \( d \) generates the same loss in moral value, independently of the existence of another individual. The point at which this gain and loss are equal is therefore the same in both cases. In this pair of cases, prioritarianism therefore displays an unappealing insensitivity to the presence or absence of inequality.\(^{33}\)

\(^{33}\) For a related claim that prioritarianism fails to recognize the importance of inequality in risky, fixed-identity cases, see Broome, “Equality versus Priority: A Useful Distinction,” *Economics and Philosophy*, forthcoming.
We have examined cases in which your choices influence the prospects and/or identities of the people who will exist, but not the number of people who exist. Our central conclusions are the following.

First, the currency of distributive ethics is a combination of an individual’s final well-being and his expected well-being conditional on his existence.

Second, there is a pluralist egalitarian view which: (a) fully respects both the unity of the individual and the separateness of persons; and (b) is rightly more willing to favour a costly improvement in the fate of the worst off the greater the reduction in inequality that is thereby achieved. Even the most plausible prioritarian view fails in these respects.

In sum, for possible people, conditional expected well-being is part of the currency of distributive ethics, and one should distribute this currency in accordance with egalitarian, rather than prioritarian, principles.