

THE PRIORITY VIEW: A DEFENSE AGAINST OTSUKA AND VOORHOEVE

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Resumen: Según la Teoría de Prioridad, beneficiar a los que se encuentran en peores condiciones importa más que beneficiar a los que se encuentren en mejores condiciones, y esto es así porque los que están peor están peor de lo que ellos mismos podrían haber estado, no porque ellos se encuentren en una peor situación respecto a aquella de otras personas. En la literatura reciente, Michael Otsuka y Alex Voorhoeve han sostenido que la Tesis de Prioridad no captura un cambio en consideraciones morales subyacentes a nuestras decisiones sobre la distribución de bienes en casos intra-personales e inter-personales por ignorar un hecho relativo pero moralmente significativo conocido como la separación de las personas. Este artículo criticará esta línea de objeción. No es obvio que el mencionado cambio de hecho exista. Aun si existe, la Teoría de Prioridad todavía podría acomodar la importancia moral de la separación de las personas.

Descriptores: Teoría de Prioridad · Derek Parfit · Igualitarismo · Separación de las Personas · Michael Otsuka

Abstract: According to the Priority View, benefiting the worse off matters more than benefiting the better off, this being the case simply because the worse off are worse than how *they* could otherwise have been, not because they worse than *others* are or could have been. In recent literature, Michael Otsuka and Alex Voorhoeve have argued that the Priority View fails to capture a shift in the moral considerations that underpin our decisions on moral distribution in intra-personal and inter-personal cases, and that it fails to do so for neglecting the relational but morally significant fact known as the separateness of persons. The present piece will target this line of criticism. It is far from clear that the aforementioned shift actually exists. And even if it does, the Priority View could still accommodate the moral importance of the separateness of persons.

Keywords: Priority View · Derek Parfit · Egalitarianism · Separateness of Persons · Michael Otsuka

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Derek Parfit describes the Priority View –(PV) for short– as an account of the moral distribution of goods where benefiting the worse off matters more than benefiting the better off. In principle, other accounts of moral distribution –e.g. egalitarianism or utilitarianism–also endorse that general claim. (PV) is distinctive because, unlike its egalitarian and utilitarian counterparts, it rules out comparative

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or relational considerations from a justification of decisions regarding moral distribution: benefiting the worse off has moral importance insofar as the worse off are worse than how *they* could otherwise have been, not worse than how *others* are or could have been. In spite of its intuitive appeal, however, this stance has been challenged by Michael Otsuka and Alex Voorhoeve (2009) and (2011). In particular, the latter argue that (PV) fails to capture a shift in the moral considerations that underpin our decisions on moral distribution in intra-personal and inter-personal cases, and that it fails to do so precisely for neglecting the relational but morally significant fact known as the separateness of persons.²

The present piece seeks to defuse Otsuka and Voorhoeve's attack. In broad lines, I shall argue as follows: significant ambiguities in their argument suggest that the aforementioned shift of moral considerations in intra-personal and inter-personal cases might not exist at all; and, even if its existence is conceded, (PV) could in principle accommodate the moral importance of the separateness of persons.

I shall divide the previous task into four parts. The first two sections are devoted to unpack the necessary conceptual framework: while section 1 displays (PV)'s core ideas, section 2 outlines Otsuka and Voorhoeve's objection. In section 3, I argue that Otsuka and Voorhoeve do not persuasively show that the kind of moral considerations which legitimize distributive set-ups in intra-personal and inter-personal cases are different. In the final section, I show that (PV) could in fact accommodate the separateness of persons, and with it, the alleged shift in moral considerations allegedly taking place between intra-personal and inter-personal cases of distribution.

1. THE PRIORITY VIEW

Parfit (1995), VII, concisely characterizes (PV) as follows:

Benefiting people matters more the worse off these people are.

According to Parfit, benefiting people matters more when and because these people are worse off; in other words, if people fare worse, then benefiting them matters more. Stating the account in this conditional form stresses its formal character: (PV) does not aim to provide an account of the good or a justification of why it is good to

² For further discussion, cf. Nagel (1979), ch. 8; Crisp (2011); Parfit (2012); Porter (2012); Voorhoeve & Fleurbaey (2012); Williams (2012); Hyams (2015); McCarthy (2015); Segall (2015); Greaves (2017); Otsuka & Voorhoeve (2018). More specifically, cf. Porter's and Segall's articles for defenses of (PV) different from the one I outline here. Unlike both their proposals, the reply I develop here against Otsuka and Voorhoeve's objection does not revise the scope of the basic prioritarian stance or its relationship to the moral fact of the separateness of persons.

benefit people; rather, assuming that it is good to benefit people and remaining neutral as to how the good should be defined, it advocates a bias towards or a distributing priority of the worse off. Thus, (PV) contends that while benefiting the better off is in itself important, benefiting the worse off has more marginal moral importance than benefiting the better off.

It is worth pausing on two distinctions before moving on. First, (PV), as stated by Parfit, may take either a pure or a pluralist form: prioritarianism is *pure* if the principle of priority is to be taken as the only valid criterion for moral distribution; *pluralist*, in turn, if it makes room for other criteria to determine our decisions. Secondly, Parfit draws a distinction between two forms of egalitarianism: on the one hand, a *substantive* version insofar as it takes inequality to be bad in itself; and, on the other, a version, suitably termed *instrumental* egalitarianism, according to which inequality is bad for its consequences. Although (PV) is incompatible with substantive egalitarianism, it is compatible with instrumental egalitarianism. This fact may be obscured by Parfit's emphasis in claiming that "on the Priority View, we do not believe in equality". One should, however, also bear in mind that he qualifies that statement saying that "we do not think it is *in itself* bad, or unjust, that some people are worse off than others." (Parfit (1995), IX; my italics). (PV) is sensitive to the fact that inequality is bad, but it grounds its wrongness on people's being worse off than how they might otherwise have been.

In general terms, the key difference between (PV) and egalitarianism is that, while the former rejects the relevance of comparative or relational considerations in the justification of decisions regarding the distribution of goods, the latter does rely on such considerations. According to (PV), the moral importance of helping the worse off does not depend on the relation between the worse off and its environment or other individuals. Parfit illustrates this point by considering the case of a person who stands the top of a high mountain and needs oxygen. If we could administer the latter good, it seems clear that it would be morally significant to help that person. Even if there was a group of people at a lower, but still pretty high, altitude, it would still be morally important to help the original individual. Thus, Parfit concedes that there would be a sense in which it matters to help this person because she is worse than the group at lower altitudes: but he also reminds us that, in another sense, comparative considerations are irrelevant, at least in the sense that it morally matters to help the original person, whether or not there are other groups of people with whom we compare this individual. Things are drastically different for the egalitarian, for the presence or absence of other individuals with whom the predicament of the single climber may be compared is crucial for determining the moral importance of helping that person: whether it benefits or not the initial individual, an egalitarian approach will try to normalize the predicament of every individual. This is indeed



the feature of egalitarianism that exposes it to the famous *Leveling-Down Objection* (cf. Parfit (1995), V). That said, let's turn now to Otsuka and Voorhoeve's objection.

2. THE MORAL DISTRIBUTION OF GOODS AND THE SEPARATENESS OF PERSONS

Otsuka and Voorhoeve develop an objection based on a comparison of one-person and multi-person cases of moral distribution—that is, by comparing cases of distribution where only intra-personal trade-offs are involved, on the one hand, and, on the other, cases of distribution where inter-personal trade-offs are also at stake. Comparisons along these lines, they claim, would reveal that there is a shift of moral weight in the kind of considerations which make decisions regarding distribution reasonable, and that (PV) is unable to accommodate that shift. In broad lines, (PV) would be unable to do so because that shift rests on the relational fact they call the *separateness of persons*. Since (PV) would thus fly in the face of moral experience, it would be an inadequate account of moral distribution. In this section, I outline this objection in some more detail.

As just stated, Otsuka and Voorhoeve build their case by comparing one-person with multi-person cases of moral distribution. One of such examples concerns the distribution of treatment for a certain disease. In the one-person case, a particular individual A, currently enjoying full health, is informed that she is going to develop a serious disease. Although it is certain that she will develop a condition, it is unknown which one from the following two alternative conditions:

Very severe impairment: a condition that leaves one bedridden, save for the fact that one will be able to sit in a chair and be moved around in a wheelchair for part of the day if assisted by others.

Slight impairment: a condition that renders it difficult for one to walk more than 2 km.

That is, A has a 50 percent chance of developing the very severe impairment and a 50 percent chance of developing the slight impairment. The example proceeds by introducing a morally motivated stranger who has a treatment for both diseases. This person wants to provide the treatment to A on a completely disinterested basis, and such treatments have the following effects: the treatment for the slight impairment would restore A's full health; the treatment for the very severe impairment does not restore full health, but improves A's predicament to the following condition,

Severe impairment: a condition in which one is no longer bedridden; rather, one is able to sit up on one's own for the entire day but requires the assistance of others to move about.

Some constraints are also imposed on this morally motivated stranger: (a) The treatment has to be administered before A develops the imminent but unknown disease; (b) Only one of these treatments can be provided; and (c) Each treatment is effective only for the disease it is intended for –that is, a treatment does not have any effect in case A fails to develop the corresponding disease. Furthermore, Otsuka and Voorhoeve make three stipulations: (i) The gains of utility of fully recovering from the slight impairment are the same as those of going from the very severe impairment to the severe impairment; (ii) Since both diseases are equally probable in A's near future –probabilities, say, supported by actual surveys in this fictional world– A herself is indifferent regarding which one of the treatments she would prefer; and (iii) Since the morally motivated stranger is acting in a selfless way, she should reasonably have to share the A's preferences. From (ii) and (iii), it seems to follow that the morally motivated benefactor would have to respect A's attitude of indifference regarding what treatment A should undergo.

The multi-person case is to a good extent parallel to the one-person case. The trade-offs, constraints, and preferences remain, by and large, fixed. Two crucial elements change, though. First, instead of there being one affected person, A, now there are two large group of people, B and C; one will develop the slight impairment; the other, the very severe impairment. Secondly, the original risk-factor is eliminated, insofar as you know which group will develop which condition: for the sake of the argument, let's say that B will develop the slight impairment; and C, the very severe impairment. A morally motivated stranger has to choose now which group she will benefit with a treatment for the aforementioned diseases. It seems more or less obvious in this case that the benefactor should choose to help group C: it morally matters more to help those who are going to be worse-off, namely, those who are going to develop the very severe impairment. According to Otsuka and Voorhoeve, actual surveys support this choice too.

A first stage of the objection against (PV) consists in stressing that there is a key difference between the one-person and the multi-person case: in the one-person case, the morally motivated stranger's decision regarding treatment-distribution should reasonably rest on A's preferences –that is, it is reasonable to give A the treatment she prefers; in the multi-person case, the benefactor's decision should not rest on what any particular member of A or B would prefer, but on independent grounds. According to Otsuka and Voorhoeve, in passing from the one-person to the multi-person case, there is a shift in the moral importance that considerations regarding A's preferences should have for the morally motivated stranger at the moment of making a decision: in the one-person case, those preferences matter; in the multi-person case, anyone's preferences matter less. For Otsuka and Voorhoeve, the relevant shift is not so much a shift in the particular decision made by the benefac-



tor at stake in both cases, as one in the kind of considerations it is reasonable to take into account when making a decision in both cases: “some forms of balancing benefits and burdens that are permitted when these accrue to a single person are impermissible in cases where these benefits and burdens accrue to different people.” (Otsuka & Voorhoeve (2009), p. 179) In the one-person case, it is permitted to make a decision on treatment-distribution in accordance with A’s preferences; in the multi-person case, however, it is impermissible (or at the very least unreasonable) to give any more weight to B’s preferences against those of C’s –the morally motivated stranger should simply provide the treatment for the very severe impairment to C.

In a second stage, the objection states that the previous difference rests on what Otsuka and Voorhoeve call the separateness of persons. To state the obvious, the separateness of persons concerns the fact that, in the multi-person case, what is at stake is not the welfare of a single individual, but that of several different individuals. I believe that, for Otsuka and Voorhoeve, this fact has moral importance because it influences the kind of justification given to decisions on distribution: that is, it influences whether a given course of action is reasonable or unreasonable, legitimate or illegitimate. In the one-person case, acting in accordance to the affected person’s preferences is legitimate or reasonable: in dealing with one person, the different possible trade-offs (however they turn out to be) could be justified by being the outcome of a decision which respected the affected person’s own preferences. Let’s say that the morally motivated stranger makes a decision which does not result on the affected person’s improvement (perhaps because of bad luck); then, the benefactor could justify herself before the affected person roughly along the following lines: ‘I acted just in your best interest: with the information I had at hand then, and avoiding bias to the best of my possibilities, I did what you would then have preferred to do then.’ In the multi-person case, however, the previous kind of justification breaks down, because the trade-offs are spread over several different individuals. In particular, to provide a treatment for the slight impairment to B cannot entirely depend on the preferences of B’s members, because other individuals –i.e., the members of C– would endure the negative effects of this determination, and we cannot justify the very severe impairment to the members of C by arguing that their evils made possible the full recovery of B’s members. Thus, the separateness of persons would be morally significant at the moment of distributing certain goods.

The third and final stage of Otsuka and Voorhoeve’s objection attempts to drive a wedge between (PV) and the notion of the separateness of persons. The chief point is that the separateness of persons may only be articulated by comparing different person’s welfare, that is, by means of a comparative or relational consideration concerning different people’s predicament. From what has been said here and last section’s reconstruction of (PV), it should be clear what problem Otsuka and

Voorhoeve envisage. On the one hand, (PV) is a non-relational account concerning the moral distribution of goods. On the other, a comparison between one-person and multi-person cases would reveal a shift of moral importance regarding the kind of considerations which legitimize decisions on moral distribution; but this shift, Otsuka and Voorhoeve contend, would rest on the relational fact of the separateness of persons. Thus, (PV) could not account for a key difference between one-person and multi-person cases, insofar as that difference would rest on a notion which (PV) could not fundamentally accommodate. Since (PV) could not make sense of fundamental relational facts like the separateness of person, neither could it make sense of the shift resting on such a fact. Hence, (PV) would not be sensitive to important differences between one-person and multi-person cases of moral distribution (cf. Otsuka and Voorhoeve (2009), p. 185).

3. ARE THERE SHIFTS BETWEEN ONE-PERSON AND MULTI-PERSON CASES?

Is the previous objection fatal for (PV)? I do not think so. In what is left of this piece, I outline two lines of thought against it. First, the shift of moral weight which Otsuka and Voorhoeve identify when comparing one-person and multi-person cases of moral distribution depends on rejecting two key ideas presupposed by (PV): Otsuka and Voorhoeve, however, fail convincingly to support that rejection. Secondly, Otsuka and Voorhoeve do not show that the separateness of persons is an essentially (as opposed to derivatively) relational fact: if that fact turned out to be derivatively relational, (PV) could in principle accommodate it into its depiction of moral distribution.

To introduce the first line of thought, let us turn for a moment to Roger Crisp's recent defense of (PV) from the previous objection (cf. Crisp (2011)). He rightly points out that the multi-person case does not pose major difficulties for the prioritarian: in that case, the morally motivated stranger acts in accordance with and in virtue of the prioritarian criterion. The challenge faced by the prioritarian consists in showing that, in the one-person case, it is also intuitively reasonable for the morally motivated stranger to act in accordance with and in virtue of the prioritarian criterion. In reply to Crisp, however, Otsuka and Voorhoeve have stressed that simply modifying the morally motivated stranger's decision in the one-person case will not do, for their objection does not concern the morally motivated stranger's actual decisions in each case, but the range of considerations which would legitimize her decisions. This is the tension, then: neither party—that of the prioritarian's or that of its critics—could be right at the same time. But I do believe that there is a sense in which both parties' strategic moves are accurate: on the one hand, I agree that merely modifying the actual decision made by the morally motivated stranger in



the one-person case will not do because Otsuka and Voorhoeve's objection does not target that; but, on the other, modifying the one-person case is a necessary condition for homogenizing the considerations that drive the morally motivated stranger's decisions in the one-person and the multi-person case. A proper defense of (PV) will need more than that, though: it also has to show that the range of reasons which make the morally motivated stranger's decisions reasonable or legitimate overlap both in the one-person and in the multi-person case: that is, it has to show that there is not a shift, from one kind of case to the other, in the moral significance of the considerations that determine decisions on moral distribution. To modify the morally motivated stranger's decision in the one-person case without showing that there is not such a shift is merely to force (more or less arbitrarily) the prioritarian view on someone who does not take it for granted. Otsuka and Voorhoeve are right in claiming that such enforcement is all Crisp does—in part, I suspect, because he fails to distinguish the two relevant stages of a defense on the prioritarian's behalf. That said, it is also necessary to concede that Crisp's move goes in the right lines, even if it stops short of a full-blooded defense of (PV).

I believe it is feasible to incorporate the prioritarian criterion into the original one-person example. According to Otsuka and Voorhoeve, A (that is, the person who is imminently going to develop a serious condition) is indifferent between the treatment for the slight impairment and the very severe impairment; since the morally motivated stranger aims to respect A's preferences, it is reasonable to share A's indifference between both treatments. It seems to me, however, that the notion of A's indifference is ambiguous in the present context, and that, once it has been clarified, it fails to show that it would be unreasonable to impose the prioritarian criterion of providing treatment for the worse-case scenario. A first, literal way of understanding A's indifference is as the complete lack of concern for what kind of treatment she undergoes. In that case, suppose that the morally motivated stranger decides to administer A the treatment for the very severe impairment. Then, Otsuka and Voorhoeve would reply, (PV) would unreasonably mandate provision of a treatment with a lower expected utility for A, since A could have equally opted for the other treatment. This seems wrong, though: by stipulation, A does not simply care which treatment she undergoes; hence, the treatment for the very severe impairment does not have a lower expected utility than the treatment for the slight impairment and, a fortiori, it does not turn out to be unreasonable for the morally motivated stranger to provide A with the treatment she deems more suitable. (PV) could thus impose its own criterion. On a second way of understanding A's indifference, meanwhile, A prefers both treatments to the same degree. Only then would it be plausible to say that, by providing A with the treatment for the very severe impairment, the morally motivated stranger would provide a treatment with a lower expected utility for A:

the latter also wanted the treatment for the slight impairment, and to the extent that the benefactor did not satisfy this preference, she is responsible of a decrease of A's level of utility. But if A's indifference is so understood, the prioritarian is still justified in imposing her criterion to the decision at stake. Recall that there are certain constraints over the morally motivated stranger, one of them being that of distributing one and only one of the available treatments. Given this limitation, it is reasonable for the morally motivated stranger to provide A with the treatment for the very severe impairment, even if A wished to undergo both treatments: in a very intuitive sense, the benefactor would be doing her best given the resources and limitations she has.³

Thus, it provisionally seems to me that the prioritarian could extrapolate her criterion of distribution to the morally motivated stranger in the one-person case. As previously explained, though, this is not enough as a defense of (PV). It is also necessary to show that the kinds of admissible considerations available to the morally motivated stranger in the one-person case are broadly the same as those available to her in the multi-person case. In other words, it is necessary to show that there is no shift of moral weight in the kind of considerations which make a particular case of distribution reasonable when we move from the one-person case to the multi-person case. I turn to this point next.

Let's assume that the multi-person case is our paradigm regarding justificatory considerations. That is, let's assume that the kind of admissible considerations in virtue of which a decision in the multi-person case would be reasonable remain fixed: by and large, these considerations concern the fact that helping the worse off has more marginal moral importance. Given that assumption, and in order to dissolve the controversial shift, I have to show that decisions in the one-person case of distribution are governed by the same kind of considerations. Consider another example of a one-person case of distribution advanced by Otsuka and Voorhoeve (what counts for this case, I suppose, also counts for the example concerning treatment-distribution):

“Imagine that you are a morally motivated stranger who learns that unless you intervene in an unpredictable natural course of events, a person will either, with 50 percent probability, suffer a smaller loss in utility. If you intervene, this person will face neither the prospect of the gain nor the risk of loss. Suppose that you opt for non-intervention on grounds that the expected gain to the person of the uninterrupted

³ In the present context, it does not seem ad hoc to me to invoke the rationality maxim that, given limited available resources, the morally motivated stranger should provide the treatment for the very severe impairment to A. Even if, pace (PV), providing the treatment for the less severe impairment was as important as providing the treatment for the very severe impairment, it would still be plausible to hold that the morally motivated stranger should rationally choose to provide the treatment for the very severe impairment in those cases where access to both treatments is unavailable at the same time.



ed unfolding of this course of events is just great enough relative to the expected loss to justify a gamble rather than the risk-free option.” (Otsuka & Voorhoeve (2009), pp. 179-180).

The corresponding multi-person case involves two affected persons and the trade-offs are such that, unless the morally motivated stranger intervenes, one of them is at risk of suffering the loss, while the other person has the possibility of receiving the gain. Otsuka and Voorhoeve correctly claim that you, the morally motivated stranger, should intervene in this latter case. Although they do not put it this way, I suspect that this decision would be reasonable precisely because it is governed by the prioritarian criterion (‘Ignore gains and equality! Help the worse off!’). Now, my main point is that there is no shift in moral weight concerning justifying considerations when we pass from the multi-person to the one-person case. In the one-person case, you should also be constrained by the prioritarian criterion. This course of action might initially seem counter-intuitive, for what I am saying here is that the morally motivated stranger should not intervene even if the wager involved in her intervention is a safe one: in other words, according to the prioritarian criterion, it would never be reasonable for a morally motivated stranger to act if her course of action has a probability, however small, of resulting in worsening the concerned person’s condition. But the only reason I can think of to deem the previous proposal counter-intuitive is the thought that a morally motivated stranger should act in accordance with the concerned person’s preferences, a thought that seems intuitive only on moral principles which beg the question against (PV). By describing the benefactor as a morally motivated stranger, Otsuka and Voorhoeve describe an agent who is only driven by maxims of morality. This is not to say a lot, though, for the relevant maxims will vary from moral theory to moral theory. Of course, if one moral maxim endorsed by the morally motivated stranger goes against (PV) (if she is a utilitarian or an egalitarian, for example), the range of admissible considerations which could define her actions will not fit in with the prioritarian criterion. This is a case, however, where our moral theory shapes our distributive intuitions, not the other way around. To show how our distributive practices would determine our moral theory, and that they would determine it in favor of (PV), it would be best not to think of the benefactor as a morally motivated stranger, but as a morally motivated acquaintance. For instance, it would be convenient to flesh out Otsuka and Voorhoeve’s one-person examples as examples where the benefactor-benefited relationship is one between father and son, or between husband and wife. Even if the benefactor’s wager would be a safe one, it is probable that she would choose to intervene. She would choose to do so because, in a very intuitive sense, it is unreasonable to wager with other people’s lives, however safe that wager turns out to be. What this shows is that, on the basis of

the prioritarian criterion, it is as unreasonable to gamble with people's lives in the one-person case as it is to do so in the multi-person case; and that, if things come to that, it is always preferable to adopt a built-in bias towards preventing a person or a group of persons to be in the worse off situation they would be if you did not act. In short, there is a case to be made for the thought that there is no shift in the kinds of moral considerations justifying our decisions on distribution when we pass from the one-person case to the multi-person case. If this assessment is plausible, then there is one reason to think that Otsuka and Voorhoeve's objection against (PV) might miss its target.

4. THE SEPARATENESS OF PERSONS AND PRIORITARIANISM

To conclude, let us briefly pause on a second reason to mistrust Otsuka and Voorhoeve's objection. I previously argued that the existence of a shift in moral weight between one-person and multi-person cases is by no means obvious. Now, for the sake of the argument, I shall assume there is such a shift and that it depends on the separateness of persons.⁴ Otsuka and Voorhoeve argue that (PV) could not accommodate the relevant shift because the latter rests on the separateness of persons, an essentially relational fact that, qua essentially relational, would escape the descriptive or explanatory scope of (PV). In reply, I believe that, even though the separateness of persons is clearly a relational fact, Otsuka and Voorhoeve do not show that it is an essentially or fundamentally relational one. The thought here is that, even if the separateness of persons was to be accounted for in relational terms, it seems possible to reduce such terms into non-relational ones. If this is along the correct lines, a defense of (PV) would be on the offing: the separateness of persons could be shown to rest in essentially or fundamentally non-relational terms—terms, that is, which (PV) could well implement into its picture of moral distribution. As far as I can see, Otsuka and Voorhoeve fail to offer any reason to rule this possibility out.

Otsuka and Voorhoeve's point does not merely seem to be that considerations of moral contribution happen to contain relational considerations; their point is that relational considerations are essential to our discourse on moral distribution. By *essentially* relational, I suspect, they at least mean that relational considerations cannot be eliminated from an account of moral distribution. In principle, it might be said that relational considerations count for decisions on moral distribution to the extent that they owe their legitimacy to prioritarian considerations – that is, con-

⁴ For further discussion about the existence of a shift in moral considerations between the one-person and the multi-person case and about the question whether (PV) takes into account the separateness of persons, cf. Porter (2012), pp. 356-358.



siderations on moral distribution might be fundamentally prioritarian, only derivatively relational. Furthermore, in spite of their derivative character, such relational considerations might not be eliminable from our moral discourse as a matter of fact.

Otsuka and Voorhoeve contend that the separateness of persons, the fact in virtue of which there is a shift in moral weight from one-person cases to multi-person cases, may be fleshed out in terms of the relative force or strength of people's justifying claims for the allocation of a given good. It is true that this way of explaining the separateness of persons will vary depending on what a claim is supposed to be. Furthermore, for all I know, those claims could be cashed out in relational terms, in which case (PV) would truly face an explanatory problem. However, Otsuka and Voorhoeve advance no clear (let alone definitive) reason against the possibility of fleshing out those claims in prioritarian terms. In fact, they actually seem to concede this point:

“In the multi-person case, one must justify any claim on resources in light of the comparative strength of the claims of others. Those who are relatively worse off have stronger claims to a given increment of improvement simply by virtue of the fact that it is, other things equal, harder to justify improving the situation of someone who is better off rather than someone who is worse off.” (Otsuka & Voorhoeve (2009), pp. 183-184).

True: Otsuka and Voorhoeve stress that the worse off's claim will be stronger than that of the better off's. But this relational qualification seems to be irrelevant: if a person has a strong claim for the allocation of a certain good, this will be so whether or not there are other people requiring the same good. Here Parfit's point applies in full force: what will drive our actions in allocating resources is not the existence of inequality as such, but the existence of claims, as it were, with a certain obligatory strength. The separateness of persons could thus be explained by the existence of individuals which have claims for the allocation of certain resources at the benefactor's disposition. If the strength of such claims is explained by the moral importance of helping the worse off, then the relational fact of the separateness of persons could ultimately be accounted for in the non-relational facts of people's claims for the allocation of the resources at stake. If this is plausible, (PV) could dodge Otsuka and Voorhoeve's objection and be back in the game.

Wrapping up, (PV) does not seem to exclude the fact of the separateness of persons. The link is certainly not all that transparent in Parfit's survey of (PV), but nothing seems to disallow such a qualification: on the contrary, everything invites to draw it. To focus once again on Parfit, (PV)'s caveats regarding relational considerations about moral distribution concern how delicate and misleading such considerations may be. Parfit, for instance, does not show a complete disregard towards them (as Otsuka and Voorhoeve depict him doing), but does handle them with care.

Although he concedes that relational considerations are relevant, he also reminds us that every depends on how comparisons are drawn. One false step and utilitarianism could be awaiting for us.

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