

Intergenerational Justice and Equality

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Abstract and Keywords

Egalitarians hold that people should be equal with respect to some morally relevant factor. While this does not imply that all inequalities should be eliminated, egalitarians do generally require that divergences from equality are presumptively worse unless special reasons render the resultant inequalities justifiable. In intergenerational contexts, egalitarianism faces special problems. While many ethicists and political theorists have emphasized the value of equality among contemporaries, there are reasons for skepticism about the value of equality between generations, or between persons who live at different times and whose lives may not even overlap. Strict principles of intergenerational equality would forbid progress and development that would improve circumstances in the future but would therefore create intergenerational inequalities by making later generations better off than earlier ones. This chapter considers aspects of the general case for egalitarianism, with specific focus on the value of equality between generations and over time.

Keywords: equality, justice, sustainability, saving, public justification

1. Equality in Intergenerational Ethics

Egalitarians hold that people should be equal with respect to some morally relevant factor (Hirose, 2015, p. 1). This does not necessarily imply that all inequalities should be eliminated, but egalitarianism does generally require that divergence from equality is presumptively worse unless it is justifiable in other terms (Cohen, 2008; Rawls, 1971; Temkin, 2012). We may speak of equality between generations, which are collective groups of persons whose members live temporally overlapping lives, and of equality between individual persons who live at different times and whose lives may not overlap. Different intergenerational egalitarian views may apply to individuals or to generations as groups, but generational egalitarians must find an appropriate way to individuate generations and to distinguish one generation from the next. Since the lives of human beings (unlike those of *paolo verde* beetles) overlap, such distinctions may be difficult to make.

Intergenerational Justice and Equality

Intergenerational egalitarianism holds that generations, or individual people who are members of different generations, should be equal in some way. Intergenerational relations pose a special problem for egalitarians because some intergenerational inequities seem to be a good thing. Progress often means that later generations will be better off than their predecessors, but most theorists find this to be unobjectionable or even a desirable inequality. For this reason, many of those who argue for equality within a generation favor at least some kinds of intergenerational inequality (Rawls, 1971; Solow, 1993a, 1993b).

This chapter considers a collection of problems faced by intergenerational egalitarianism. In section 2, I discuss different forms of egalitarianism, distinguishing these views from some of their close relations and considering their implications for intertemporal and intergenerational contexts. Sections 3 and 4 address intergenerational implications of telic and instrumental egalitarianisms. Section 5 discusses sustainability, a concept which often represents intergenerational equality, or equity, as a kind of baseline level (Vrousalis, 2016). Finally, this baseline conception of intergenerational equity is linked to the problem of equality in intergenerational saving, via examination of a popular and plausible conception of public justification.

2. How to be an Egalitarian: A Menu of Alternative Forms

2.1. Telic versus Instrumental Egalitarianisms

If equality matters, why does it matter? *Telic egalitarianism* is the view that equality is intrinsically valuable. On this view, no further value need be pursued by egalitarian policies other than equality itself. By contrast, *instrumental egalitarianisms*, as they will be called here, hold that equality is valuable only because it facilitates the achievement of other goals. Many instrumental egalitarians focus on the bad effects of inequality. For example, one might hold that some inequalities make it impossible for people to relate to one another as equals or to enjoy the same fundamental social or moral status (Anderson, 1999). Inequalities can undermine democratic institutions (Young, 1990), facilitate unacceptable forms of oppression (Scanlon, 2018), undermine the social bases of self-respect (Rawls, 1971), or impede social recognition (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Honneth, 1995). These various instrumental views are not mutually exclusive. Perhaps there is a plurality of different goods that require equality for their achievement. Nor are telic and instrumental views mutually exclusive. Equality might be valuable in itself as the telic view holds, but also valuable for a variety of other instrumental reasons.

2.2. Equality of What and for Whom?

Many egalitarianisms are distributive theories since equality appears to describe a pattern of distribution. But with respect to what should people be equal? Different theories emphasize welfare, preference satisfaction, resources, capabilities, or other values. In

Intergenerational Justice and Equality

this chapter, we will sometimes identify egalitarianism as the view that everyone should be equally well-off. But it should be understood that being well-off need not simply refer to welfare or preference satisfaction. It will be used to refer to whatever currency it is appropriate to take into account in a theory of intergenerational distributive justice (Page, 2007; Sen, 2009). And one might reasonably question whether values like social recognition and self-respect are appropriately described as goods to be distributed according to requirements of justice (Honneth, 1995; Young, 1990).

2.3. Scope

Theories also vary depending on their scope: Who—that is, which people or how many generations—should our distributive theory include? One might urge that justice holds only among contemporaries and that future generations are therefore excluded (Beckerman, 2003) or that some, but not all, future generations must be taken into account (De-Shalit, 1995). To others it seems natural to include all times and generations or all people who are potential victims or beneficiaries of present choices and policies (Vrousalis, 2016).

2.4. If Intergenerational Inequalities Are Bad, What Makes Them Bad?

It is also useful to consider the reasons people have for thinking that inequalities are bad or that some inequalities are bad while others are not. Those who object to egalitarian ideals often point out that people are different and that differences are a kind of inequality. Wilkerson and Pickett (2009) provide empirical evidence that income inequality creates and exacerbates other pernicious social ills. For example, societies with higher rates of income inequality are characterized by lower life expectancy, higher homicide rates, higher rates of mental illness, and increasing levels of social distrust. Thomas Scanlon (2018) argues that economic inequalities stem from and lead to further forms of injustice. According to Scanlon, whose views are further discussed in section 4.2 below, wealth and income inequality create humiliating status differences. Such inequalities result in unacceptable and exploitative power relations in which some people have oppressive control over the lives of others. But the significance of intergenerational and intertemporal equalities and inequalities may be quite different from their significance for people who are contemporaries. Because members of distant future generations do not share the same society, inequalities between us and them might not be expected to undermine democratic institutions in the way they are thought to do when inequalities exist among contemporaries. Nor are intergenerational inequalities as likely to facilitate relations of oppression or exploitation—at least, not in the most standard forms (but see Gardiner, 2017). Similarly, the value of social recognition and self-respect is often thought essentially to involve the autonomy or well-being of those who possess them. Inequalities between members of distant generations may not raise these concerns.

2.5. Equality, Priority, and Sufficiency

Egalitarian views are often associated with or contrasted with views that give priority to those who are less well-off. Prioritarians hold that the goodness of outcomes is a function of overall well-being among the members of a population but with extra weight or priority given to worse-off individuals within the population. Prioritarian views tend toward equality since they will evaluate more equal outcomes to be better, other things being equal, than unequal outcomes. Different prioritarian views can be distinguished not only according to the degree of priority they afford to the worst-offs but also according to the way they apply to groups in which some may be less-well-off than others, but no one is badly-off. A maximally prioritarian view, *maximin*, requires that those who are worst-off should be as well-off as possible. The closely related *leximin* rule requires making those who are worst-off as well-off as possible, then maximizing benefits for the next-worse-off, and so on through the entire population (Rawls, 1971; Van Parijs, 2002). *Sufficientarian* views sometimes resemble prioritarianism but cease to give priority to the worse-off once their level of well-being reaches some sufficient level (for example, once no one is badly off). Each of these views can be applied to intertemporal and intergenerational populations, so in evaluating conceptions of intergenerational egalitarianism, it will be important to keep them in mind as alternatives.

2.6. Anti-Egalitarianism?

Anti-egalitarians are opposed to equality. But which kinds of equality? A thoroughgoing anti-egalitarian view would need to provide reasons against each of a wide variety of different egalitarian species: There may be a unique form of anti-egalitarianism associated with each different egalitarian theory. In Greek mythology, anti-egalitarianism is represented in the story of the giant Procrustes, who invited tired travelers to sleep in a special bed he had prepared for them. If his guests were too short for the bed, he would stretch them until they fit. If they were too long for the bed, he would lop off just enough to ensure that they fit. Many anti-egalitarians represent egalitarian ideals as a Procrustean bed that must stretch or lop its victims to make them all the same. Since the idea that everyone must be the same is repugnant, Procrustean egalitarian ideals are unappealing. But since not all egalitarianisms are Procrustean, this cannot be a general objection. Since different egalitarian claims are quite distinct from one another, it is doubtful that any a single anti-egalitarian argument or view could apply to them all.

3. Intergenerational Telic Egalitarianism

Telic egalitarianism is the view that equality is good in itself, independent of other consequences or underlying reasons. Here is a simple statement of the view:

Telic egalitarianism (TE): Outcomes or states of affairs are in one way better to the extent that they are more equal.

Intergenerational Justice and Equality

More equal with respect to what? TE is a genus of which there are many species. Different forms can be distinguished depending on the thing to be equalized—the *egalandum*. The most widely discussed form of TE aims to equalize welfare or well-being:

Telic welfare egalitarianism (TWE): One outcome or state of affairs A is in one way better than another outcome or state of affairs B if the subjects in A are more equally well-off than the subjects in B.

As stated, TWE is neutral among times and places. Because of this temporal neutrality, TWE constitutes a strong form of intergenerational egalitarianism. We could use TWE from the perspective of an impartial external observer, a kind of philosophical “God’s eye view,” to compare alternate world states at a time or to consider the distribution of welfare over time from the first welfare-possessing ancestor to the furthest distant future welfare-possessor. This means we can also use it to compare alternative feasible intertemporal and intergenerational welfare distributions in our own world.

Other TEs might compare people according to their wealth, their autonomy, their capabilities, or any number of other comparative factors. TWE has notable contemporary defenders (O’Brien, 2019; Temkin, 2012) and is widely discussed. The view implies that equal outcomes are in one way better, not that they are better tout court. This leaves open the possibility that the value of equality might appropriately be weighed against other values. Many advocates of TWE treat equality as a value that weighs against the competing value of increasing welfare (Parfit, 1991; Temkin, 2012). On this view, one might regard outcomes as better when people are generally better-off but qualify this judgment by counting inequality as a feature that makes better outcomes worse than they would otherwise be. For example, an average utilitarian who regards the total well-being of an outcome as a function of aggregate well-being might measure the total amount of good in a two-person or two-generation outcome using a function like this (Hirose, 2015, p. 66):

$$G = \frac{1}{2}(W_1 + W_2) - \alpha |W_1 - W_2|$$

In this two-person or two-generation world, total welfare is the sum of individual welfare levels ($W_1 + W_2$), and the average is found by multiplying this value by $\frac{1}{2}$. The amount of welfare inequality can be measured as the absolute value of the difference between the welfare of the two individuals (or generations) involved. The disvalue of equality would then be a function of this absolute value, here shown as $\alpha|W_1 - W_2|$. If the value significance of equality is minimal, then α will be small. If equality has great value or inequality has great disvalue, then α will be large. One might imagine egalitarian views that place such a high disvalue on inequality that the aggregate value G could be negative, even when average utility is very high. In cases with more than two persons/generations, a more complex measure of inequality will be needed (Sen, 1997). For a mixed view for which equality is one basic value among others, the disvalue of inequality might simply be subtracted from the total value an outcome would have had if it had been more equal, as this equation shows.

Intergenerational Justice and Equality

Using TWE as an intertemporal and intergenerational evaluative standard, we can consider two population trajectories A and B (Figure 1). In this type of diagram, made popular by the work of Derek Parfit, the width represents the size of the population, while the height represents their levels of well-being. We have two periods or generations, t1 and t2. While A and B have the same-sized populations, A has intergenerational inequality that B lacks. According to TWE, this is a reason why B is better than A. If B seems to you to be intuitively better, in this respect, than A, then this may indicate your acceptance of something like TWE.

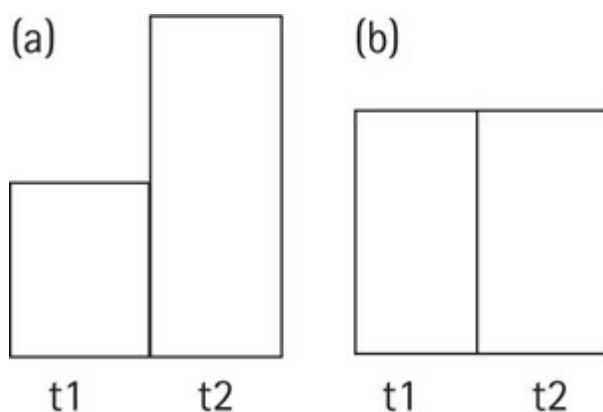


Figure 1. Is equality intrinsically valuable?

One view that might support TWE is the view that well-being has diminishing marginal value. If so, then increasing the well-being of a well-off person by some increment would be less good than increasing the well-being of a less-well-off person by the same increment. The view that well-being has diminishing marginal value is different from the view that goods and wealth have diminishing marginal utility for those who possess them. The former would be part of a theory of value, while the latter is a theory about the way goods and wealth contribute to personal well-being. There is good evidence that goods and wealth have diminishing marginal utility. Is it possible that our understanding of this fact, whether instinctive or theory-driven, may influence our intuitions about the value of utility itself?

We should not be too quick to accept TWE on the basis of its intuitive appeal alone. Intuitions about the relative value of A and B may tacitly incorporate assumptions about their inhabitants. If the members live at the same time, then the inequalities in A might constitute a disadvantage to those who are less well-off. We might assume that the more equal outcome has a higher value since we might suppose that a unit of additional well-being has more value when it improves the welfare of someone who is less well-off than when it improves the situation of someone who is better-off. But these considerations are not based on TWE: TWE is the view that inequality involves disvalue even if it doesn't cause unhappiness and even if well-being does not have diminishing marginal value. It is the view that inequality and equality matter all by themselves.

Intergenerational Justice and Equality

TWE implies that equal distributions are (in one way) better than unequal distributions, so it will imply, somewhat counterintuitively, that intertemporal paths that involve progressively increasing welfare are in one way worse than alternative paths that involve equal welfare over time (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Intergenerational equality versus intergenerational development.

TWE implies that C is in one way better than D since it is more equal than D. But there are many reasons to regard D as better than C: there is no one for whom C is better than D. In D, every member of each subsequent generation is better-off than any member of a previous generation. If welfare levels are additive, then D has more total welfare and higher average welfare than C. If the same people live in the different generations of C and D, then D is Pareto superior to C since it is better for some people and worse for no one. Because of this, many people find the implications of TWE to be counterintuitive in the intergenerational case. But is it odd to suppose that C is in one respect better than D? One could then acknowledge that there are other respects in which B is better than A and that these other respects may be more important when we compare the overall goodness of the two possible paths. The disvalue of the inequality in D might be outweighed, as a moral consideration, by the greater overall welfare in D. But many critics find it odd to think that the inequality in D should be counted as any kind of disvalue if there is no one for whom it constitutes a disvalue.

This argument constitutes an intergenerational version of the leveling down objection to telic or axiological egalitarianism. Parfit describes this objection as follows:

If inequality is bad, its disappearance must be in one way a change for the better, *however this change occurs*. Suppose that those who are better off suffer some misfortune, so that they become as badly off as everyone else. Since these events would remove the inequality, they must be in one way welcome, on the Telic View, even though they would be worse for some people and better for no one. This implication seems to many to be quite absurd. (1991, p. 17. Emphasis in original text.)

Intergenerational leveling down appears to be an especially objectionable form of Procrustean egalitarianism: If the pursuit of equality makes people worse-off without improving things for anyone else, it seems to be wasteful or morally wrong. Some regard the leveling down objection to be a sufficient reason for rejecting TE. Others (O'Brien, 2019;

Temkin, 2012) do not regard the leveling down objection to be a decisive argument against the telic view.

4. Instrumental Egalitarianisms

Instrumental egalitarianisms value equality not in itself or for its own sake but for some other reason. Instrumental views, in this sense, include the views of utilitarians who value equality because (as they may argue) equal distributions achieve greater aggregate well-being. But they also include the view that equality is important because unequal power leads to injustice or undermines democratic institutions or constitutes a violation of some deontic constraint. For example, the argument that inequality exacerbates intergenerationally damaging greenhouse gas emission rates (e.g., Rao & Min, 2018) will count as an instrumental view. This section will address a subset of these views: Section 4.1 evaluates the utilitarian argument for egalitarianism and its intergenerational application, and section 4.2 evaluates relational egalitarianism, with substantial focus on ideas developed in the work of Thomas Scanlon (1998, 2018).

4.1. Utilitarian Equality: Maximizing Intergenerational Social Welfare with Diminishing Marginal Utility

Utilitarians hold that outcomes are better when they have greater aggregate well-being. Different utilitarian views recommend different modes of aggregation: *Total utilitarians* hold that we should maximize the sum of each person's individual utility; *average utilitarians* hold that we should maximize the same sum, divided by the number of individuals. Both views have widely discussed paradoxical and counterintuitive implications applied to varying sizes of future populations (Parfit, 1991; Rawls, 1971, 1999b). Some advocates hold that we should accept these implications, while others urge that there are alternate forms of utilitarianism that can avoid them.

Under standard assumptions (Horowitz et al., 2007), utilitarian views imply a strong form of distributive egalitarianism with respect to the distribution of goods and/or wealth because goods and wealth have *diminishing marginal utility* (DMU) for those who possess them. That is, these goods increase the well-being of those who are worse-off at a higher rate than they do for those who are better-off. It is on this basis that Hare (1978) argues that utilitarianism is an egalitarian doctrine.

Intergenerational Justice and Equality

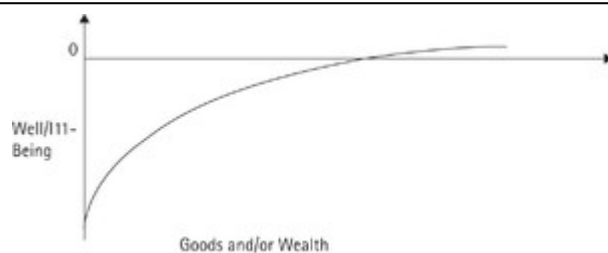


Figure 3. Diminishing Marginal Utility of Goods and/or Wealth

If well-being and goods/wealth are related in the way described in Figure 3, then a unit of either of them should be expected to have a greater effect to increase the well-being (or mitigate the ill-being) of someone who is worse-off than if the same unit were instead given to someone who is better-off. This plausible assumption is embodied in the thought that a \$100 bill matters less to a zillionaire than it would to a person who is destitute.

The zero point—the horizontal line in Figure 3—represents the point of neutral well-being. So levels below zero have negative well-being (ill-being), while those above have positive well-being. The placement of the zero point is controversial. Classical utilitarians argued for a satiation point, after which goods and wealth have little effect on well-being. In this spirit, J. S. Mill writes, “After the means of subsistence are assured, the next in strength of the personal wants of human beings is liberty” (1872, p. 129). On Mill’s view, goods and wealth have little personal value once a sufficient minimum has been achieved. Mill’s claim is not that additional wealth has no value but that it has relatively little value and that there are other things (liberty and the enjoyments that liberty makes possible) that offer greater rewards once the minimum has been met. One might interpret this view as egalitarianism of another sort: Mill and his predecessor Senior urged that the goal should be that none should lack “all the necessities of life and some of the conveniences” (Senior, 1828) but that beyond this point there is little social benefit associated with having more. The proposal that all should have equal access to this sufficient minimum may be understood as a sufficientarian requirement, but it is also a utilitarian form of egalitarianism with respect to goods and wealth, to complement the more standard utilitarian egalitarianism with respect to welfare.

Most contemporary utilitarians assume that the time at which a person exists is not relevant from the moral point of view, only the person’s level of well or ill-being (see Zuber and Fleurbaey, this volume). These views therefore imply that the utilitarian arguments for equality apply equally among persons within a given generation or between persons in different generations. For this reason, utilitarianism with DMU will imply a strong form of intergenerational egalitarianism. But this tendency toward equality is not the same as a principled commitment to it. Pure utilitarians are not strict egalitarians, since they will favor intergenerational inequalities whenever they promote aggregate welfare.

4.2. Relational and Deontic Egalitarianisms (Scanlon, Rawls, Frankfurt, Anderson)

Many theorists have argued that inequalities in wealth or income are bad because they are unjust or because they create circumstances in which injustices are likely or inevitable (Anderson, 1999; Frankfurt, 1988; Rawls, 1971; Scanlon, 2018). Rousseau (1755/1988) famously argued that inequalities in wealth or power create social inequalities that make it impossible for people to relate as equal members of the society they all inhabit. On Rousseau's view, small inequalities tend to grow into larger inequalities over time. Unless steps are taken to prevent it—and Rousseau appears to argue that no steps could possibly prevent it—inequalities should be expected to grow until one person, or a small group of persons, has all the power and wealth, and everyone else has nothing.

More recently, Thomas Scanlon (2018) argues that inequality creates unacceptable social differences in status, power, and opportunity. These differences undermine political institutions and make it less likely that members of the worse-off groups will receive public benefits to which they have a valid claim. Scanlon also notes that inequalities in income and wealth tend to arise from prior circumstances of historical unfairness. Scanlon urges that these constitute six independent reasons that explain why severe wealth/income inequality is undesirable and why just institutions should be organized to prevent it:

1. Inequality can be objectionable because it creates humiliating differences in status.
2. Inequality can be objectionable because it gives the rich unacceptable forms of power over those who have less.
3. Inequality can be objectionable because it undermines equality of economic opportunity.
4. Inequality can be objectionable because it undermines the fairness of political institutions.
5. Inequality can be objectionable because it results from violation of a requirement of equal concern for the interests of those to whom the government is obligated to provide some benefit.
6. Inequality of income and wealth can be objectionable because it arises from economic institutions that are unfair. (Scanlon 2018, pp. 8–9)

It is worth noting that Scanlon's reasons constitute reasons why wealth and income inequalities are bad, not reasons why equality is good. The problems Scanlon identifies arise when inequalities create or constitute a severe disadvantage for those who are worse-off. Thus, Scanlon's argument here is not a full-throated defense of the instrumental value of equality but is instead an argument that some kinds of inequalities are instrumentally bad. However, this limitation may be a strength of Scanlon's view.

Scanlon's objections clearly apply to inequalities among contemporaries. But there is a reason for skepticism about their use to criticize intergenerational inequalities. If the tendency of wealth inequality to undermine the fairness of political institutions reflects the ability of powerful, wealthy individuals to have disproportionate influence on democratic

Intergenerational Justice and Equality

outcomes, for example, this would be a power that the wealthy exert over their less advantaged contemporaries. There are reasons to think that some kinds of intergenerational inequalities will not raise the injustices and social disadvantages Scanlon identifies. One might argue that differences in (as opposed to deprivations with respect to) status, power, and economic opportunity can create injustice only between contemporaries. If our descendants are better off than we are, they cannot use their power to distort democratic outcomes to benefit themselves at our cost, to humiliate us, or to exploit us by bending us to their will. Equal economic opportunities matter most when people are competing with one another for positions of advantage. We do not compete in this way with our descendants.

The same cannot be said of the relation between predecessors and descendants: It is easily conceivable that powerful members of an earlier generation might seek to use their resources to exert power over later ones (Gardiner, 2017). There are many different ways in which this could take place. For example, earlier generations might put in place long-lived institutions that constrain later choices of people who exist after they have already died. Constitutions (when they work) effectively bind the choices of later generations, a fact that was vigorously litigated in correspondence between James Madison and Thomas Jefferson (Madison 1790/1992). While many actual constitutions have been framed with solicitous care with the interests of posterity in mind, this power of the present over the future may be used carelessly or even for pernicious and unjust ends. The Roman emperors compelled their descendants to worship them as gods and to raise mighty temples in their honor. Surely this reflects an unjust use of intergenerational power. In a similar vein, it might be argued that democratic institutions are intergenerationally unjust because the interests of future generations are inadequately represented. Contemporary constitutionalists consider ways to change this by implementing constitutional measures that ensure at least proxy representation for future generations (Gosseries, 2008, 2014; Muniz-Fraticelli, 2008).

Present generations can impose unjustified costs on future generations in a more direct way through resource depletion and environmental damage. While intergenerationally unequal economic opportunities will not place people in direct competition for the same positions of advantage, it is certainly possible for earlier generations to squander resources later generations will need. When they do this, it seems perfectly natural to identify their behavior as unfair when it deprives later generations of wealth or of resources to which they have an equal and equally valid claim. This thought is the basis for an argument that sustainability might be an intergenerational egalitarian requirement of justice. The next section considers ways in which this idea might be articulated in more detail.

5. Sustainability, Intergenerational Egalitarianism, and Public Justification

One common conception of “sustainability” is as a requirement that later generations should be left at least as well-off as earlier ones (Solow, 1993a, 1993b). This requirement is also sometimes represented as a principle of intergenerational equality (Vrousalis, 2016). ‘Sustainability’ is often interpreted to imply that there is a present obligation to leave future generations with an equal resource base so that global resources and environmental systems will not be diminished over time, from one generation to the next. Other conceptions of sustainability incorporate a sufficientarian element, requiring that the present generation avoid compromising future needs in the effort to meet present needs.

5.1. Egalitarian Sustainability as a Baseline Requirement of Intergenerational Justice

The most commonly cited conception of sustainability is a need-based sufficientarian criterion coined in the United Nations’ Brundtland report, often called “Brundtland sustainability” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The Brundtland Report defined sustainable *development*, but the account of sustainability given has been widely used to refer to a more general requirement:

Brundtland sustainability: Institutions, policies, and management practices are sustainable if and only if they “meet the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.”

(Adapted from World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43)

The Brundtland sustainability standard is a sufficientarian requirement since it focuses on minimization of unmet needs, not on the maximization of happiness or consumption or freedom or capabilities or any other proposed good. Sufficientarianism is often treated as a species or as an alternative to stricter egalitarian theories (Hirose, 2015, Chapter 5), but sufficientarianism is more properly a kind of limited prioritarianism. While sufficiency requirements tend toward equality because they give priority to those who have unmet needs, simple sufficientarian views, unlike full prioritarian views, place no restriction on the extent of permissible inequalities once unmet needs have been minimized (Wolf, 2018).

Other conceptions of sustainability quite clearly constitute requirements of intergenerational equality, at least as a baseline to rule out unacceptable or intergenerationally unjust development paths. For example, Robert Solow defines *sustainability* as a requirement “to conduct ourselves so that we leave the future the option to be as well-off as we are” (1993b, p. 181). Solow holds that welfare, specifically the level of opportunity for welfare, should be stable from one generation to the next:

Intergenerational Justice and Equality

Sustainable welfare (Solow sustainability): Institutions, policies, or management practices are sustainable if and only if their operation in the present generation leaves later generations the capacity to be as well-off as (no worse-off than) earlier generations.

(Solow 1974, 1993a, 1993b; see also Armstrong, this volume)

What Solow has in mind is somewhat different from other requirements of equal opportunity for welfare, or equal opportunity for advantage, as it is sometimes put (Arneson, 2006). Solow expressly equates welfare with consumption and interprets this in terms of access to consumable resources. He quickly moves, therefore, to the view that our obligation to future generations is to pass on to them an equal—that is to say, undiminished—stock of consumable goods and resources. This leads Solow to a conception of sustainability as non-depletory use of capital resources, which requires each generation to ensure, through saving, conservation, or created economic value, that every subsequent generation will have equal access to a value-equivalent stock of fungible capital. Following Solow's initial presentation of this view, John Hartwick (1977) worked out the rate of investment necessary to offset declining resource stocks so that opportunities will not diminish from one generation to the next. The principle that we should invest at an appropriate rate so that we precisely offset the value of declining non-renewable resource stocks as we use them up is often called "Hartwick's rule."

Non-depletory use (Hartwick/Solow sustainability): Institutions, policies, or management practices are sustainable if and only if their operation leaves later generations capital resources that are value-equivalent to the capital resources available to earlier generations.

(Hartwick, 1977; Solow, 1974, 1986)

The Hartwick/Solow rule is usually interpreted as a suggestion that we set aside a portion of the funds generated from the use of irreplaceable resources and then invest these resources so that they will provide continuing benefits for later generations. Hartwick makes it clear, however, that he regards research and technological development as the best investment we can make on behalf of later generations. The goal, according to Hartwick, is to ensure equality of opportunity from one generation to the next.

Some critics have objected to the Solow/Hartwick view that the natural world should be treated as a stock of fungible capital that can be replaced (Norton, 2005). If we "use up" the atmospheric resources of Earth, undermining the stability of the global climate, can we really expect to compensate later generations with technology? If our carbon-intensive energy usage decimates life in the oceans, is there anything we could do for later generations that would adequately compensate them? Other critics (Sen, 2009; Wolf, 2018) note that Solow's view may be inadequate. The present generation endures circumstances that include enormous amounts of poverty and injustice. If we unnecessarily pass

Intergenerational Justice and Equality

these blights on to future generations, by providing merely equal opportunities and capital resources, we may be doing far less than justice requires.

For this reason, among others, Amartya Sen urges that we should seek to expand future opportunities instead of merely sustaining existing levels. Sen urges that views like Solow's are wrong to frame a sustainability requirement around resources and consumption, arguing that we should instead direct our attention to the capabilities and freedoms these goods make possible (Sen 2009). In this vein, he expressly argues for a conception of sustainability as "the preservation, and when possible expansion, of the substantive freedoms and capabilities of people today without compromising the capability of future generations to have similar—or more—freedom" (Sen, 2009, pp. 251–52). This enables us to articulate a version of Sen's view that can be compared with others we have considered:

Sustainable freedom and capability (Sen): Institutions, policies, or management practices are sustainable if and only if their present operation preserves or expands the substantive freedoms and capabilities of people in the present generation without compromising the ability of later generations to have similar or greater freedom.

Sen argues that his principle is an extension of the Brundtland report's account of sustainable development, combined with Solow's non-depletionary use requirement. But analysis shows that Sen's proposal is quite different from these two models. The Brundtland standard requires that we minimize needs deprivation. Because it is formulated as a negative, the Brundtland proposal will not advocate increasing population size in order that there be more people whose needs can be met. Sen does not specify whether expanding substantive freedoms from one generation to the next could be done by increasing the size of the population, but his formulation does not rule out this interpretation. Unlike needs, Sen's "freedoms" are not satiable—a person may always expand their capability set, and there is no endpoint, on Sen's view, where one is maximally free. And while the Brundtland proposal focuses our attention on those who are worse-off, Sen's criterion is ambiguous in its implication for trade-offs between the freedoms of those who are better-off and the freedoms of those who are worse-off. Read in light of Sen's work, focused as it has been on issues of poverty and need, there is good reason to suppose that Sen himself would favor an interpretation of this principle that would give prior consideration to those who are worst-off. But unlike the Brundtland proposal, Sen's sustainability criterion does not express this priority.

5.2. Intergenerational Saving and Public Justification

In his widely discussed account of intergenerational equity, John Rawls (1971, 1999a, 1999b) recommends framing intergenerational distribution as a problem of saving. Rawls' original account of justice between generations clearly reflects the influence of Robert Solow, Partha Dasgupta, and Kenneth Arrow, with whom Rawls discussed the problem both in person and in correspondence (Arrow, 1973; Dasgupta, 1973, 1974; Solow, 1974;

Intergenerational Justice and Equality

see also Brandstedt, this volume). Rawls argues that the problem of intergenerational saving is intractable: “I believe that it is not possible, at present anyway, to define precise limits on what the rate of savings should be” (1971, Section 44). The problem, as Rawls saw it, is that saving improves the situation of later generations at cost to earlier ones. Since Rawls assumes that later generations must be at least as well-off as their predecessors, any additional saving involves sacrifice by the worse-off generations for the benefit of future others who are in any case better-off. But Rawls usually regards regressive transfers of that kind as unjust. Instead of arguing that intergenerational saving can sometimes benefit the worst-off (Dasgupta, 2019; Wolf, 2010), Rawls abandons the prohibition on regressive transfers in the context of intergenerational saving.

There may be another way to understand the problem. There will be better-off and worse-off members of each generation. But in a Rawlsian society, institutions will be set up to ensure that benefits enjoyed by those who are better-off must at the same time provide maximal advantage to those who are worst-off. It may be that the best way to accomplish this will be to provide direct benefits to the worst-off members of the present generation. But future generations are numerous, and the goal of saving, in Rawls as in Brundtland, is to ensure that everyone has adequate resources to live a worthwhile life:

The purpose of a just (real) saving principle is to establish (reasonably) just basic institutions for a free constitutional democratic society (or any well-ordered society) and to secure a social world that makes possible a worthwhile life for all its citizens. Accordingly, savings may stop once just (or decent) basic institutions have been established. At this point real saving (that is, net additions to real capital of all kinds) may fall to zero; and existing stock only needs to be maintained, or replaced, and nonrenewable resources carefully husbanded for future use as appropriate.

(Rawls 1999a, p. 107)

In Rawls’ view, appropriate intergenerational saving serves to reduce the likelihood that future generations will find themselves in circumstances that make it impossible, or seriously unlikely, that they will be able to live a worthwhile life. This means, for Rawls, the ability to exercise the “two moral powers”: the capacity for a sense of justice and to revise and rationally pursue a conception of the good. It also means the ability to exercise fundamental liberties as one pursues one’s life plan. But Rawls recognized that there are present persons who live in circumstances of deprivation so severe that their opportunities fall below this important threshold. What should members of the present generation do, faced with the choice between saving to mitigate or minimize future deprivation and working to mitigate or minimize present deprivation? One might simply give priority to the present generation. But if we do this, our failure to improve our social institutions might result in greater total deprivation over time. One might, conversely, give priority to future generations. But this would seem inappropriately callous with respect to the interests of those who suffer present deprivations. Note that the choice, in this case, is a trag-

Intergenerational Justice and Equality

ic one since it involves allocating resources in order to mitigate deprivation in circumstances of scarcity where not all deprivation can be eliminated.

But there is a third alternative way to articulate an appropriate rate of saving, a way that is more fully in the spirit of Rawls' view and which is founded on a notion of public justification made famous by Thomas Scanlon. Scanlon (1998) employs this criterion as one of right and wrong, but it also has its home in a theory of public justification:

Scanlon's formula: An act is wrong just when, and because, such acts are disallowed by some principle that no one could reasonably reject.

(Parfit, 2003; Scanlon, 1998)

Scanlon's formula, here given in Parfit's (2003) interpretation, rules out some actions and policies—those that could be reasonably rejected by some of those to whom they apply. Scanlon specifies a case for which it is not reasonable to reject a principle:

Unreasonable rejection: It is not reasonable for a person to reject a principle that imposes a personal burden if every alternative principle would impose even greater burdens on others.

(Parfit, 2003; Scanlon, 1998)

There may be reasonable differences of judgment about which alternatives impose even greater burdens on others. Suppose, for example, that the sum total of disadvantage is greater under the distribution defined by principle A than under that defined by principle B, but disadvantages are more widely distributed under A than under B so that the worst-off person in B is worse-off than anyone in A. According to Scanlon, we may not, in such circumstances, simply sum the lighter burdens others may endure because there is no individual who suffers summed burdens or enjoys summed benefits (Scanlon, 1998, p. 230). This claim is itself controversial (Parfit, 2003). But it does seem reasonable to reject a principle that imposes significant burdens if alternative principles would impose no burdens or would impose uncontroversially lighter burdens on others. For now, we can leave behind the comparisons about which people may reasonably disagree. A more complete articulation of the theory under consideration would need to provide an account of the way in which such comparisons should be made.

We might also consider a correlate that specifies circumstances that are, other things being equal, sufficient ground for reasonable rejection of a distributive principle:

Reasonable rejection: Other things being equal, it is reasonable for A to reject a distributive principle if it deprives A of necessities in order to provide non-necessity benefits for others.

This correlate, framed in the spirit of the Brundtland conception of sustainability, will prohibit the choice of principles that permit certain kinds of intergenerationally unsustainable resource use and will imply an egalitarian baseline at which needs are met. To see

Intergenerational Justice and Equality

this, consider two alternative intergenerational distributive principles ϕ and ψ . Principle ϕ would permit members of the present generation to use up resources needed by future generations, even if these resources are not needed by any present people. Principle ψ would prohibit distributions that involve unnecessarily unmet needs. Reasonable rejection implies that deprived future persons could reasonably reject ϕ . But those who are less advantaged under ϕ than under ψ cannot reasonably reject ϕ because of the burdens it imposes, since the alternative would impose greater burdens on others.

Do these principles prohibit options that would improve the situation for later generations? Not all improvements imply need-deprivation, and it will not always be reasonable for those less advantaged by intergenerational resource accumulation to reject personally disadvantageous proposals. While these principles do not recommend prioritizing the interests of future generations over those of present persons, there are circumstances in which they will permit the greater burdens to be borne in the present. Consider the problem of intergenerational saving in a context where present persons face a choice between mitigating present deprivation, or saving to improve institutions in order to prevent future deprivation. If the decision to save an additional unit of resource can reasonably be expected to prevent and mitigate more future deprivation, then those who are currently deprived cannot reasonably reject the proposal to save these resources for the future. The alternative that would mitigate present deprivation would impose heavier burdens on others in the future. By contrast, a proposal to allocate this additional unit to present persons, in these circumstances, could reasonably be rejected by future persons on whom the decision not to save would impose additional and greater burdens of deprivation. Perhaps the just rate of saving for each generation is the rate that could not be reasonably rejected, in this sense, by anyone present or future. That is, the just rate of saving is the rate that meets a condition requiring that policies with intergenerational implications must be in principle justifiable to present and future persons whose lives they will shape. Such a view involves an assumption of equal standing for present and future persons since neither receives priority or preferential consideration. And it appears, at least in plausible circumstances, to imply a requirement of intergenerational equality: It requires, in the spirit of the Brundtland criterion, that present needs must be met in a way that will not compromise the ability of later generations to meet their needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987).

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