



Equality and Value-holism

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article je considère un récent défi à l'égalitarisme développé par Michael Huemer. Le challenge de Huemer prend la forme d'un dilemme : les égalitaristes peuvent être soit atomistes soit holistes en ce qui concerne la valeur de l'égalité. S'ils sont atomistes, alors ils doivent accepter que l'égalité n'ait pas de valeur intrinsèque ; s'ils sont holistes, alors leur point de vue est inconsistant avec une intuitive mais très plausible forme de conséquentialisme. Je montre que ce dilemme ne doit pas perturber les égalitaristes. Ils peuvent être holistes en ce qui concerne la valeur et adhérer en même temps au conséquentialisme.

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I consider a recent challenge to egalitarianism raised by Michael Huemer. Huemer's challenge takes the form of a dilemma: egalitarians can either be atomists or holists about equality's value. If they are atomists, then they must accept that equality in fact does not have intrinsic value; if they are holists, then their view will be inconsistent with an intuitively very plausible form of consequentialism. I show that this dilemma should not trouble egalitarians. Egalitarians can be holists about value and still embrace consequentialism.

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Equality and Value-holism

Egalitarians believe that equality between persons in the distribution of significant goods is intrinsically valuable.¹ The main and familiar objection to this view has been the so-called levelling down objection: if equality is intrinsically valuable, then this would entail, counter-intuitively, that the world is made better when equality is achieved by bringing better off people down to the level of the worst off (all else being equal), even if this does not improve the condition of the worst off.² Whether this objection to egalitarianism is fatal, however, remains an open question.³ In this paper, I consider a second and more recent challenge to egalitarianism raised by Michael Huemer.⁴ Although Huemer does not present it in this way, his challenge essentially takes the form of a dilemma: egalitarians can either be atomists or holists about equality's value (a distinction I shall explain shortly). If they are atomists, then they must accept that equality in fact does not have intrinsic value; if they are holists, then their view will be inconsistent with an intuitively very plausible form of consequentialism. Either way, so Huemer maintains, we should reject egalitarianism.

I show that this dilemma should not trouble egalitarians. Egalitarians can be holists about value and still embrace consequentialism. As well as showing that egalitarianism can resist Huemer's challenge, the arguments in the paper also give some support to a further conclusion about the relationship between egalitarianism and value-theory: egalitarians must be value-holists if they wish to hold a coherent position.

1.

I begin with a brief summary of Huemer's argument. Huemer aims to show that if we accept three basic assumptions about the nature of value, we must reject egalitarianism. The three assumptions commit us, in other words, to the conclusion that equality between persons is not intrinsically valuable. Huemer's three assumptions are as follows:

Intrapersonal non-egalitarianism: equality in the distribution of utility across times within a single individual's life is evaluatively neutral (i.e. how utility is spread across a life is a matter of moral indifference).⁵

¹ By "intrinsic value", I mean "non-instrumental value".

² For the canonical statement of the objection, see Parfit, Derek. 2002, "Equality or Priority?" In *The Ideal of Equality*, eds. Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams, 81-125, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

³ For an egalitarian reply to the objection, see Temkin, Larry, "Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection." In Clayton and Williams (eds.), *The Ideal of Equality*.

⁴ Huemer, Michael, 2003. Non-Egalitarianism. *Philosophical Studies*, 114: 147-171.

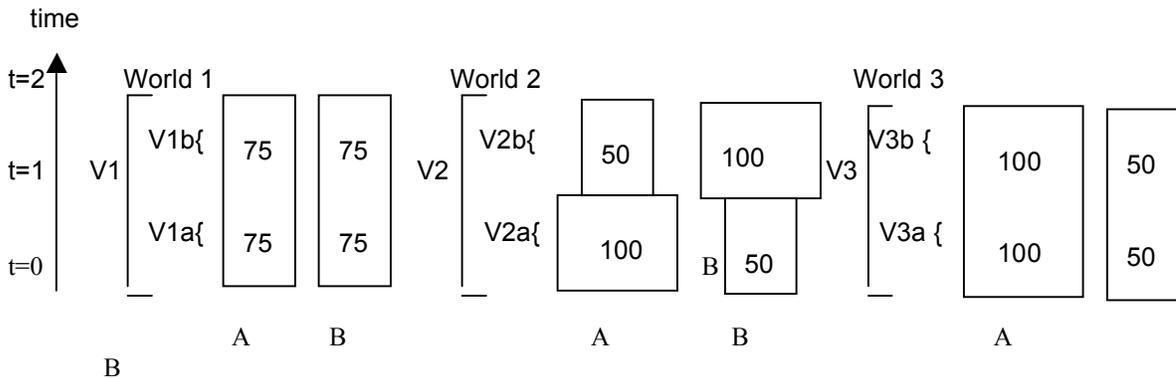
⁵ For the contrary view, in favour of intrapersonal egalitarianism, see Mendola, Joseph. 2004. Justice Within a Life. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 41: 125-140.

Strong supervenience of utility-value: events have the same utility-value if they are intrinsically identical in terms of their non-evaluative properties.

Cross-temporal additivity of utility-value: given two events, A and B, occupying non-overlapping time intervals, the utility-value of the fusion of A and B equals the utility-value of A plus the utility-value of B.

Huemer’s argument for why these three assumptions commit us to rejecting egalitarianism is based on a comparison of three possible worlds (see figure 1). Each world contains only two people, A and B. In world 1, A and B each have 75 units of utility in each half of their lives. In world 2, A has 100 units in the first half of his life, and 50 in the second half, while B has 50 units in the first half of his life, and 100 in the second. In world 3, A has 100 in both halves of his life, while B has 50 in both halves of his life.

Figure 1. The bars indicate the level of utility that A and B enjoy.



To see how the argument works, we first need to note a difference between what Huemer calls the *total utility* of an event, namely, "the sum of the utilities of all the individuals involved in the event", and the *utility-value* of an event, which is its total utility plus any additional value the event may have in virtue of the way in which total utility is distributed across individuals. To illustrate: utilitarians, who assign no value to distributions of utility, believe the utility-value of an event is always *the same as* the total utility of an event. By contrast, Egalitarians, who assign intrinsic value to equal distributions of utility, believe the utility-value of an event can be *greater than* its total utility if the distribution of utility in that event is equal.

Back to the argument. If we believe the three assumptions mentioned earlier we would be committed, so Huemer maintains, to the conclusion that worlds 1 and 3 have the same utility-value. Contrary to what egalitarians believe, the equality that exists in world 1 thus makes no difference to its utility-value. His argument for why the three assumptions commit us to this conclusion is presented in the following schema (V1 refers to the total utility-value of world 1. V1a and V1b refer to the total utility-values of the first and second halves of world 1, respectively.):

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| 1. $V1=V2$ | From intrapersonal non-egalitarianism |
| 2. $V2a=V3a$ | From strong supervenience of utility-value |
| 3. $V3a=V3b$ | From strong supervenience |
| 4. $V2a=V2b$ | From strong supervenience ⁶ |
| 5. $V2b=V3b$ | From 2,3,4 |
| 6. $V2a+V2b=V3a+V3b$ | From 2,5 |
| 7. $V2=V2a+V2b$ | From cross-temporal additivity |
| 8. $V3=V3a+V3b$ | From cross-temporal additivity |
| 9. $V2=V3$ | From 6,7,8 |
| 10. $V1=V3$ | From 1,9 |

Essentially, the argument boils down to three claims. First, worlds 1 and 2 are of equal value because the only difference between them is that utility is distributed unequally within lives in world 2, and, by the assumption of intrapersonal non-egalitarianism, that difference does not give rise to any difference in value. Secondly, all the halves of worlds 2 and 3 are of equal value, by the assumption of strong supervenience of utility-value. Thirdly, worlds 2 and 3 are of equal value, since, if all their halves are of equal value, then, by the assumption of cross-temporal additivity, the worlds that result from the fusion of those halves are also of equal value. If worlds 1 and 2 are of equal value, and if worlds 2 and 3 are of equal value, then worlds 1 and 3 are of equal value. Since egalitarianism says world 1 is of greater value than world 3, we must reject therefore egalitarianism.

2.

Huemer's argument is plainly valid. The trouble lies in its assumptions. In this section, I show that one of Huemer's assumptions, namely, cross-temporal additivity, amounts to atomism about value, and furthermore, that atomism about value is intuitively implausible. I take this appeal to intuition to show only the following: a burden of justification must rest on Huemer if he wishes to employ that assumption in order to reject egalitarianism. The remainder of the paper shows that Huemer does not meet this burden.

Very roughly, atomists about value believe that the value of an entity is equal to the sum of the values of its parts. Holists reject the claim that the value of an entity is equal to the

⁶ Strictly speaking, this premise may only follow if one also assumes a principle of anonymity, according to which the values of given distributions between persons (such as, $V2a$ and $V2b$) are not affected by the identities of those persons.

sum of the values of its parts. Both atomism and holism about value might seem natural when we consider different kinds of entities. The value of a bundle of coins, for example, seems well captured by the atomists' valuation procedure. The value of a painting or a song, on the other hand, seems better captured holistically: it would seem bizarre to maintain that the value of a painting is equivalent to the sum of the values of its parts.

Leaving aside Huemer's first assumption of intrapersonal non-egalitarianism (which egalitarians need have no objection to), his assumption of cross-temporal additivity amounts to atomism about the value of trans-temporal entities. That is, it amounts to the view that the value of a trans-temporal entity is *always* identical to the sum of the values of its constituent temporal parts.

Atomism about the value of trans-temporal entities is, however, intuitively implausible. Consider the following thought-experiment. Suppose the first half of the actual world has been like the first half of Huemer's world 2 (which is the same as the first half of world 3), and suppose we must now decide whether the second half of the actual world will be like the second half of world 2 or whether it will be like the second half of world 3. Consider now the following two points. First, all other things being equal, it seems most plausible to hold that the second half of the actual world should be like the second half of world 2. In other words, we intuitively believe that the two halves of world 2, put together, have a greater value than the two halves of world 3, put together.⁷ Secondly, all four halves of worlds 2 and 3, when taken in isolation, have the same value, both in terms of the total utility they contain and in terms of the value they contain by virtue of the distribution of that utility (the latter point assumes the principle of anonymity). If atomism about the value of trans-temporal entities were true, therefore, the two halves of world 2, put together, would be of equal value to the two halves of world 3, put together. Since, intuitively, they are not of equal value, intuitively, atomism about the value of trans-temporal entities is counter-intuitive.

3.

It is important to note that the appeal to intuition just made shows only that a burden of justification falls on those, like Huemer, who wish to employ the assumption of cross-temporal additivity in an argument against egalitarianism. Now Huemer does attempt to defend cross-temporal additivity (henceforth, CTA). He does so on the ground that its rejection cannot be reconciled with a plausible form of consequentialism. If Huemer is right about this, egalitarians who seek to avoid his challenge by embracing holism may be unable to reconcile their view with a plausible form of consequentialism. Let us

⁷ That we believe this does not necessarily show that we believe that equality is intrinsically valuable; it might instead show that we believe that the worst off should be as well off as possible (the priority view). However, this is no objection to the current example since it is not meant to show that equality is intrinsically valuable, but only that cross-temporal additivity is intuitively implausible.

briefly consider Huemer’s argument for why egalitarians who deny CTA cannot embrace a plausible form of consequentialism.

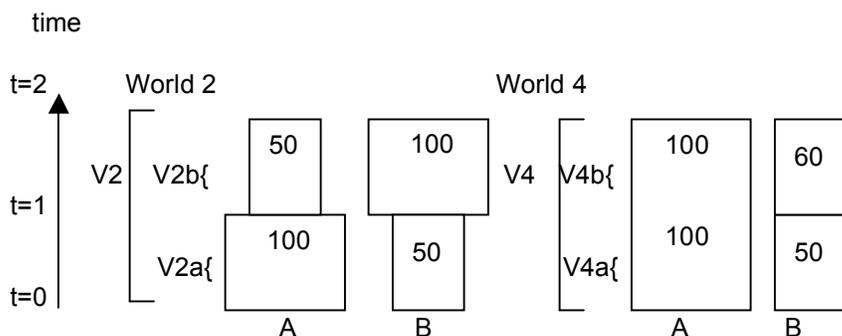
Huemer asks us to consider a form of consequentialism that includes the following three decision-making rules:

1. Choose the action which is such that, if you choose it, *the world will be best*
2. Choose the action which has *the best overall consequences*
3. Choose the action which is such that, if you choose it, *the future will be best*

Huemer holds that all three rules are reasonable. However, he maintains that rejecting CTA disables us from following all three rules, and that we should therefore not reject CTA.

To show this, Huemer begins by assuming, for the sake of argument, that world 3 is inferior to world 2 on egalitarian grounds, and further, that a negligible improvement in world 3 will still leave it inferior to world 2. This means that a new world, world 4, which improves on world 3 only negligibly in that B receives 10 extra units of utility in the second half of his life, will also be inferior to world 2 (see figure 2).

Figure 2. We assume that world 4 has less utility-value than world 2 because its slightly greater amount of utility does not make up for its inequality.



Huemer now asks us to consider how a holist would answer the following pair of choice problems:⁸

Problem 1: The first half of the real world’s history has been like the first half of world 2. At t1, we are offered a choice between bringing about either the second half of world

⁸ Huemer actually presents two pairs of choice problems. For brevity’s sake, I discuss only the first pair. The objection I will be raising to his analysis of this pair has equal force against his analysis of the other pair.

2 or the second half of world 4. Huemer maintains that the holist should choose the second half of world 4 on the basis of the following reasoning: (a) $V2b=V2a=V4a$ (by virtue of strong supervenience); (b) $V4b>V4a$; therefore, (c) $V4b>V2b$.

Problem 2: We must choose between bringing about world 2 and bringing about world 4. Clearly, the egalitarian holist is committed to choosing world 2. (Recall, we are assuming that world 4 has less utility-value than world 2.)

The lesson Huemer draws from the pair of choice problems is this: if CTA is false, as the egalitarian maintains, then the three above decision-making rules, all of which are reasonable, conflict with each other. As Huemer points out, problems 1 and 2 are essentially the same problem: “A choice between the second half of world 2 and the second half of world 4, *given* that the first half of each occurs, is equivalent to a choice between worlds 2 and 4.”⁹ And yet, if CTA is false, then the answers to that same problem generated by the three rules do not cohere. If CTA is false, the “best world” rule commits us to choosing V2b, whereas the “best consequences” and “best future” rules commit us to choosing V4b.

4.

Huemer’s analysis is mistaken, however, and holists need not worry that their position clashes with a basic form of consequentialism. It is not correct that the falseness of CTA leads the three decision-making rules into conflict with each other. If CTA is false, then the “best consequences” and “best future” do not require that we choose V4b, as Huemer maintains, but rather that we choose V2b, which is consistent with what the “best world” rule requires. This is because the choice between V2b and V4b is a choice not just between two halves of worlds but also between two worlds as wholes. Our choosing V2b has, as its consequence, world 2 as a whole; our choosing V4b has, as its consequence, world 4 as a whole. Insofar as world 2 is, because of its equality, more valuable than world 4, egalitarians can thus maintain that V2b is both a better consequence and better future than V4b. For egalitarians who reject CTA, all three decision-making rules thus issue in the same answer.

Huemer anticipates and replies to a version of this objection, but his reply fails. Huemer denies what I am proposing as an answer to problem 1, namely, that world 2 is a consequence of our choosing V2b. His argument is as follows:

Intuitively, the consequences of an action cannot lie (even partly) in the past. In particular, if A is some event that has already occurred, and my action causes B, then we should not call the combined event (A + B) an additional ‘consequence’ of my action, over and above B. For example, I can bring about that I eat a cookie on November 7, 2002. If I do, I will not thereby bring it

⁹ Huemer, “Non-Egalitarianism”, p. 158.

about that (Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, and I ate a cookie on November 7, 2002); that fact will not be a further consequence of my action, over and above the cookie-eating, that I need to take into account in making my decision.¹⁰

Huemer's strategy, then, is to show that the holist must rely on a false claim when insisting, as I do, that world 2 is a consequence of choosing V2b. This is the claim that a combined event (A + B) is a further consequence worth taking into account of an action that brings about event B after event A has occurred.

In reply, I suggest that whether a combined event (A + B) is a further consequence worth taking into account of an action that brings about event B after event A has occurred depends on the nature of the combined event in question. Suppose that the combined event is one in which there is no valuable relation between its constituent events. In that case, it would indeed be false that this combined event is a further consequence worth taking into account. This is the point that Huemer's Napoleon-cookie example really shows. It is because there is no valuable relation between Napoleon's losing at Waterloo and my eating a cookie that the combination of these two events will not be a consequence worth taking into account when I decide whether or not to eat the cookie. But notice that, while Huemer's Napoleon-cookie example might show that *one* type of combined event is not a further consequence worth taking into account, it does not show *all* types of combined events are not worth taking account. In particular, it does not show that those combined events that contain a valuable relation between their constituent events are not worth taking into account. The holist, then, can claim – and this is all she need claim – that if and only if a combined event (A + B) contains a valuable relation between its constituent events, then that combined event is a further consequence worth taking into account in our consequentialist decision-making of an action that brings about event B after event A has occurred. This claim is not threatened by the Napoleon-cookie example.

Let me strengthen the case for the holist's position with the following example. Suppose that my co-performer in an opera has just sung the first half of a lovely song and I must decide whether to complete the song. Now, if we assume, as seems plausible, that there exists a valuable relation between the two halves of a lovely song, then, according to what I have argued, the fact that a *whole lovely song* will have been sung would be a further consequence of my action worth taking into account when deciding whether or not I should sing the second half of the song (a further consequence, that is, to the fact that *the second half of the song would have been song*). If this is sensible, then, by analogy, it is also sensible for egalitarians to maintain that if there is a valuable relation between the two halves of world 2, then world 2 will be a consequence worth taking into account of my choosing V2b. Once we scrutinise closely Huemer's objection to the holist's application of the "best consequences" rule, then, that objection appears unwarranted.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 160-1.

5.

Huemer's challenge to egalitarians can be presented as a dilemma in which egalitarians must either be atomists about value, in which case they cannot show that equality has intrinsic value, or they must be holists about value, in which case they cannot reconcile their position with a basic form of consequentialism. I have shown that the second horn of the dilemma is not as fatal as Huemer assumes. Egalitarians can embrace value-holism and avoid inconsistency with consequentialism. Huemer's challenge to egalitarians therefore fails. Nevertheless, it has merit in showing that egalitarians may have to be value-holists in order to defend their position.¹¹

¹¹ I would like to thank Serena Olsaretti, Martin O'Neill, and Andrea Sangiovanni-Vincentelli for their comments on previous drafts of this paper.