

# THE “DECENT LIFE” STANDARD: DOES EQUALITY MATTER?

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## 1. Introduction

On sufficientarian accounts of global distributive justice obligations, what we owe others is informed by what is sufficient for a decent life. Different theorists elaborate on this theme by invoking a set of basic needs, capabilities, or basic human rights, as we see with accounts offered by Martha Nussbaum, David Miller, and Richard Miller.<sup>1</sup> Alternatively, sufficiency theorists may stress instead the central role of political autonomy or self-determination, and give weight to the necessary conditions for a society’s being able to manage its affairs “reasonably and rationally”, as John Rawls does in the *Law of Peoples*.<sup>2</sup>

Egalitarians vary in what they take the more demanding content of the duty to be. But they often have in common the view that there is more that can be required of one in discharging our obligations of justice. Sufficientarian accounts are often contrasted with egalitarian positions, and the sufficientarian standard, especially when it takes the form of so-called humanitarian duties to meet basic needs, is thought to be weak or otherwise misguided. It is not clear this contrast accurately captures the range of possibilities, as we see shortly in discussing positions such as the one I have developed in a recent book, *Global Justice*.<sup>3</sup>

Global egalitarians can take themselves to be committed to various positions. They might, for instance, argue for one or more of the following: a global difference principle, global equality of opportunity, global basic income, entitlements to an equal share of the value of all resources, equal consideration of the interests of all in designing a just global basic structure, or global luck egalitarianism.<sup>4</sup> A dominant grounding for the egalitarian commitment is guided by a luck egalitarian intuition. Luck egalitarianism is a view according to which the purpose of distributive principles of justice should be to mitigate the influence that luck has on individuals’ life prospects. Consider how it is a matter of luck whether one is born into an affluent, developed country or a poor, developing nation. Yet where one happens to have been born has such an

important bearing on how one’s life will go. The current distribution of global wealth and opportunities does not track persons’ choices and efforts but rather is greatly influenced and distorted by luck. What is objectionable here is that existing social and political institutions have converted contingent brute facts about people’s lives into significant social disadvantages for some and advantages for others. Persons as moral equals can demand that any common order that they impose on one another start from a default assumption of equality and departures from this be justified to those who stand to be adversely affected.

Though I concede luck egalitarians *start* with a powerful intuition and have some quite good arguments, I reject luck egalitarianism on now familiar grounds made famous by Elizabeth Anderson in her article, “What is the point of equality?”, namely that the concern with equalizing luck focuses on the wrong object. As we see with real-world egalitarian social movements, the focus should rightly be on creating *relations of equality* which have as their focus not equalizing luck but rather eliminating sources of domination and oppression that preclude standing in the right kinds of relations with one another, namely those characterized by equal respect, recognition, and power. I endorse relational equality. The power of relational equality is underappreciated in my view. It sometimes gets us to some quite strong commitments, indeed ones that might even converge with those egalitarians, more traditionally conceived, would endorse.

In this paper I explore important ways in which the sufficientarian ideal of ensuring people have the prospects for decent lives can rightly lead to concern with equality. In Section 2 I outline what ensuring people have the prospects for a decent life consists in on my view. I also examine how concern for equality, especially relational equality, fits into this account. In Section 3 I briefly argue that the gap between my account and what egalitarians should rightly be concerned with may not be all that great. By appealing to Tim Scanlon’s views about when equality matters, I make a succinct case for possible convergence for an important range of cases. My model has also been the subject of some empirical research and in Section 4 I report on those results.

## **2. Global Justice and Equality**

### (a) Global Justice: some basic elements

In *Global Justice*,<sup>5</sup> I develop a cosmopolitan model of global justice that takes seriously the equal moral worth of persons, yet leaves scope for defensible forms of nationalism along with other legitimate identifications and affiliations. In Chapter 3 I begin the discussion of what we can reasonably expect of one another in the domain of justice. An alternative Rawlsian-style normative thought experiment offers a systematic and vivid way for thinking through such issues (though the arguments stand alone as well).<sup>6</sup> The main issue delegates to a hypothetical conference must entertain concerns what *basic* framework governing the world’s inhabitants we can reasonably expect to agree on as fair.<sup>7</sup> After considerable argument about what that entails, I endorse the following position:

Global justice requires that all are adequately positioned to enjoy prospects for a decent life, which requires we attend especially to (1) enabling need satisfaction, (2) protecting basic freedom, (3) ensuring fair terms of cooperation in collective endeavours, and (4) social and political arrangements that can underwrite these important goods are in place.

All four of these components constitute the basis for grounding claims of entitlement. The detail of which claims they ground is begun in the middle section of the book by considering five domains in which our entitlements can be specified in more particular terms, concerning global poverty, taxation, liberty protections, humanitarian intervention, immigration, and the global economic order. There is no easy or straightforward way to move from the four categories that describe the contours of a decent life to obligations to secure these for others. Moving from items on the list of what is needed to secure a decent life to obligations requires some significant discussion of empirical theories dealing with causes, contributory factors, and obstacles to the realisation of goals listed. It also requires discussion of mechanisms available for protecting the goods enumerated, for enforcing obligations, and the like. Sometimes appropriate mechanisms to secure elements may not be straightforward or obvious, as is the case when we consider the role freedom of the press has in securing adequate protection for basic liberties. Similarly, when we consider our taxation and accounting regimes we see much scope for reforms that would better protect and secure countries’ abilities to assist their citizens in meeting basic needs.

### (b) Equality

How, if at all, does equality matter in my account? In virtue of the four central components of my account of global justice, equality can matter in significant ways. It will help

to set out in numbered form, and emphasize, several features of my account of global justice, which have a bearing on the issue of how our equality should matter. As I argue in the book, global justice requires that all are adequately positioned to enjoy prospects for a decent life, which entails that we attend especially to (i) enabling need satisfaction, (ii) protecting basic freedom, (iii) ensuring fair terms of cooperation in collective endeavours, and (iv) social and political arrangements that can underwrite the important goods outlined in (i) - (iii). The *basic* account of global justice has these *four* central components however, in addition, subsequent chapters also make clear that I endorse a number of other views that have a bearing on how demanding this account is, and also how equality matters in it. First, I am also committed to (v) an ideal of democratic equality. This requires that we promote standing in relations of equality with one another, notably those that promote equal respect, recognition, and power. Furthermore, (vi) one of our basic needs is for autonomy, which means we must be vigilant for ways in which autonomy can be undermined by conditions conducive to domination. It is also important to emphasize that (vii) the commitment to fair terms of cooperation in collective endeavours will often entail a concern for more equality.

To illustrate how all of this works in favour of a concern for equality within societies, let us start with a specific form of the worry about inequality: is it permissible to provide an adequate but unequal (and inferior) education to girls in a particular society, when boys within that society receive a much better education? If a good is being provided to boys, there is much in my account that would support the view that it should be equally provided for girls. Consider the idea that democratic equality requires standing in relations of equality with one another. Standing in relations of equality with others in the same society requires equal provision of certain goods, such as voting and education. We also have a basic need for autonomy, which requires that we are vigilant for ways in which features of our societal arrangements might promote domination. Insofar as boys' superior education fosters such opportunities, further support can be marshaled against the idea of endorsing adequate but inferior education for girls. Support for equal provision can also be derived from the commitment to fair terms of cooperation in collective endeavours. The fourth central criterion that seeks social and political arrangements that promote the preceding three important goods would require this as well (at least in virtue of the need for autonomy and fair terms of cooperation).

Concerns with relational equality, non-domination and fair terms of co-operation that often yield a concern for more equality within states attract parallel attention in the global sphere. An important thesis explored in the book is that there is a significant need for improved global regulation as an effective and neglected way of honoring our commitments to (i)-(vii). As we see then, fostering *relational equality* is the goal and distributional issues are important to that goal, but they do not and should not exhaust our concern with equality. By looking at where unequal provision does undermine standing in relations of equality with one another and where it does not, and, importantly, where other factors not related to individual holdings undermine standing in relations of equality, we are able to come up with a more nuanced account of when and how our equality matters. The argument has to be made in domain- and good-specific terms. For certain goods, equality is part of adequacy. Education and voting would seem to be paradigm cases. But equal provision need not be important for all goods. Equal provision of housing may be one example. Moreover, in many cases, relevant concern with equality should guide us towards a focus on improved regulation rather than distribution per se, since what blocks the possibility of standing in relations of equality is the exercise of unequal power.

### 3. Scope for Convergence

It is plausible that my views converge with recommendations egalitarians should endorse from their preferred accounts. In order to make this case quite succinctly I discuss Tim Scanlon’s position.

In “When Does Equality Matter?” Scanlon identifies five kinds of reasons for objecting to inequality and for seeking to eliminate or reduce these. First, “we often have reason to reduce inequalities for essentially *humanitarian* reasons, because taking from those who have more is the only, or the best, way to alleviate the hardships of those who have less”.<sup>8</sup> A second type of reason derives from concern with status: concern for reducing inequality is often merited because of the humiliating differences in status that are created. (He suggests that perhaps this is connected to promoting fraternity.) A third reason derives from concerns about power, especially, the unacceptable exercise of power of those who have more over those who have less. Fourth, there are concerns related to fairness: sometimes eliminating inequalities is necessary “to preserve the equality of starting places that is required if our institutions are to be fair. Great

inequality of wealth and income can, for example, undermine equality of opportunity and the fairness of political institutions”.<sup>9</sup> And the fifth reason is that at least sometimes “if an agency is obligated to deliver some good to various beneficiaries, it must, absent special justification, deliver it in equal measure to all of them”.<sup>10</sup>

Scanlon conjectures that these “reasons may provide a full account of the role that substantive equality has in our thinking about social justice”.<sup>11</sup> Scanlon’s astute views seem to have helpfully identified the occasions on which we should be concerned with equality. But if these are the occasions on which we should be concerned with equality, it seems that what egalitarians should be concerned with converges importantly with my own view. Recall that on my account eliminating neediness, attending to situations in which people stand in relations of inequality with one another, eliminating opportunities for domination, and fair terms of cooperation (inter alia), are what should command our normative attention. These foci correspond strikingly well with the occasions Scanlon identifies as warranting attention from a more traditionally egalitarian perspective.<sup>12</sup>

#### **4. Some empirical evidence**

As part of another research project, I have been involved in some empirical testing of models of well-being and what it is to have a decent life. The first phase of the research project involved testing the cross-cultural robustness of a list of capabilities.<sup>13</sup> The second phase involved learning from the results of the first and testing an alternative framework, namely the one I explore in *Global Justice*, and sketched above in section 2. Here are three of the questions we asked, along with what was provided to interview subjects.

##### (a) Extract from interview schedule.

###### Question 1:

A recent model of what it is to have a decent life proposes 4 major categories that deserve attention. An outline of the model follows. For each category we would like to know (a) what you think about the importance of the items listed, especially your view of the importance of

failing to achieve any of these items. We would also like to know (b) whether you think there are important omissions that should be added to this account of what it is to live a decent life.

### I. Enabling people to meet basic needs

There are 5 important categories of basic needs that are especially worthy of attention:<sup>14</sup>

#### 1) Health (both (i) physical and (ii) psychological)

(i) To be enabled to enjoy physical health

For instance:

To be adequately nourished.

To have adequate protection from the elements, such as adequate shelter would provide.

To enjoy reproductive health.

(ii) To be enabled to enjoy psychological health

For instance:

To enjoy a healthy emotional life. This involves special care in early childhood and the nurturance of key capacities such as for empathy, also being able to express and manage emotions (such as anger).

To have self-esteem, self-respect, and confidence.

To be resilient to important external stressors (being able to learn to deal with setbacks and resistance).<sup>15</sup>

#### 2) Security

To feel safe and secure (for good reason), in at least some places, particularly one's home.

(See also further categories below especially II.)

#### 3) Understanding

To think, reflect, reason, and imagine, in ways informed by adequate education.

To engage in reflection and planning about one’s life.

4) Autonomy

To participate in choices that govern one’s life; to have some control over one’s life.

To make plans for one’s life.

To implement some actions in response to reflection and deliberation.

5) Decent Social Relations

To have attachments to people; to love and care for those who love and care for us.

To live in a way that shows respect and concern for other human beings.

To contribute to others’ well-being.

To feel supported in at least some environments; having support systems. Having people around who you can trust and rely on; not feeling alone, isolated, and unsupported.

## II. Having Protection for Basic Liberties

Some of the important freedoms that need protection include:

- a. Freedom from assault: being able to be reasonably secure against physical assault (including domestic violence and sexual abuse)
- b. Freedom of conscience, religion, and dissent
- c. Freedom of expression and speech
- d. Freedom of movement: having some ability to move freely from place to place, within one’s community
- e. Freedom to participate in political life



### III. Enjoying fair terms of cooperation in collective endeavours

For instance, agreements, policies, or institutions should endeavour to avoid exploitation and, more generally, seek to take the interests of all affected, especially the most vulnerable parties, into account, so that these are fair to everyone affected (as much as this is possible).

Some examples might be:

Laws which prescribe a minimum wage.

Laws against abusive forms of child labour.

Having fair opportunities to seek employment.

### IV. Social and Political Arrangements that support I - III above

Illustrations include these:

Not being socially stigmatized. Not being discriminated against on the basis of gender, religion, race, ethnicity, and other possible areas of vulnerability.

Having opportunities for people to feel valued, acknowledged, and accepted.

Being able to enjoy balance in one’s life: that there is space for work, leisure, and other important domains of life.

#### Question 2: Decent life – priorities

Which of the four categories listed above do you think matters most to a decent life? Are they all equally important or are some categories more important to a decent life than others?

#### Question 3: Equality

Do you think the notion of equality matters to what a decent life consists in? If so, how does equality matter?

#### (b) Some discussion of the results of these questions

The answers to Question 1 (a) show excellent confirmation that the central categories of what makes for a decent life do resonate with people’s experiences. Indeed, there is unanimous support that all items mentioned are important for a decent life. (It is notable that there is a much higher level of support for the importance of all items indicated than in Phase I of the project in which a list of capabilities formed the basic taxonomy to be tested. In Phase I there was some variance as to whether respondents thought items important or not [the lowest item scored a 42% agreement rating as to the importance of the value of life, and while health did get a 100% agreement rating, for thirteen of the fourteen categories, some respondents disagreed that the item was important for well-being.]

Question 2, concerning how to prioritise the categories I through IV confirms what was hypothesized, which was that either people would say they cannot be prioritized, as they are all important, or if pressed, they would pick out category I, being enabled to meet basic needs, as especially salient. About half went for the former strategy with almost all the rest selecting category I as most important.

We also asked the questions of whether and if so, how equality matters to a decent life. At least 80% of our sample believed that equality does matter to a decent life. Most people think equality matters, when it does, because of relational factors – how people stand in relation to each other. It is also notable that people often mistake a concern for equality with concern for sufficiency.

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper we see how the sufficientarian ideal of ensuring people have the prospects for decent lives can lead to appropriate concern with equality. After outlining what commitment to ensure a decent life entails and how concern for equality, especially relational equality, fits into this account, I argued in Section 3 that the gap between my account and what egalitarians, more traditionally conceived, should rightly be concerned with may not be all that great. It is plausible that my views converge with policies egalitarians should endorse, if we take seriously Tim Scanlon’s views about *when* equality matters. In Section 4 I discussed the empirical research that has been done on my model. We see that the model resonates well with people’s views and experiences.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Martha Nussbaum *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, Mass. Belknap, 2006); David Miller *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Richard Miller *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- <sup>2</sup> John Rawls *The Law of Peoples: with The Idea of Public Reason Revisited* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- <sup>3</sup> Gillian Brock *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)
- <sup>4</sup> For proponents of some of these views see Charles Beitz *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Thomas Pogge *Realizing Rawls* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1989); Darrel Moellendorf *Cosmopolitan Justice* (Boulder: Westview, 2002); Simon Caney “Cosmopolitan Justice and Equalizing Opportunities” *Metaphilosophy* 32 (2001): 113-134; Hillel Steiner “Just Taxation and International Redistribution” *Nomos XLI: Global Justice*, Ian Shapiro and Lea Brilmayer, eds., (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Hillel Steiner “Territorial Justice and global redistribution” in Gillian Brock and Harry Brighouse (eds.) *The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 28-38; Brian Barry “Humanity and Justice in Global Perspective” in Brian Barry *Democracy, Power and Justice* (Oxford: Oxford university press, 1989): 434-493; Philippe Van Parijs *Real Freedom for All: What (if anything) Can Justify Capitalism?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Philippe Van Parijs (ed.) *Arguing for Basic Income* (London: Verso, 1992); and Carol Gould *Globalizing Democracy and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- <sup>5</sup> Gillian Brock *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)
- <sup>6</sup> In arguing for what we are all owed as human beings, I argue for what our reasonable expectations of one another should be, especially in situations of ongoing cooperation. The set-up of a normative thought experiment simply aims to make this more vivid to us, but the basic idea can be argued for independently of that framework. When properly set up, such thought experiments are a good way to flesh out what we can reasonably expect of one another in a way that avoids inappropriate partiality: if people do not know what positions they might find themselves in during the lottery of life, they will pay more attention to what would constitute fair arrangements.
- <sup>7</sup> I will not be able to cover the details of the normative thought experiment here, but I can give a brief sketch of some of the main moves. An easy way to enter the thought experiment is to imagine that a global conference has been organized. You have been randomly selected to be a decision-making delegate to this conference. You are to participate in deciding what would be a fair framework for interactions and relations among the world's inhabitants. Though you have been invited to the decision-making forum, you do not know anything about what allegiances you have (or may have after the conference concludes), but you do know that decisions made at this conference will be binding. It may turn out that you belong to a developing nation, occupy a territory with poor natural resources, and so forth. Given these sorts of possibilities, you are provided with reasons to care about what you would be prepared to tolerate in a range of different circumstances.
- <sup>8</sup> Tim Scanlon “When Does Equality Matter?”, unpublished paper, p. 15.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

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- <sup>12</sup> He notes: “The importance of eliminating stigmatizing differences in status also depends on a kind of proximity. Where people reasonably compare their lives and conditions with each other, differences in level can lead to reasonable feelings of loss of esteem” (ibid., 17). This is important and again seems to place notable constraints on which inequalities matter.
- <sup>13</sup> In both Phases I and II we interviewed people, such as social workers and counselors, who provide services to disadvantaged groups.
- <sup>14</sup> For all needs listed under Category I, these should be understood as “enabled to...”. So, for instance, “enabled to be adequately nourished” rather than “to be adequately nourished”. I found the continual repetition unnecessary (and perhaps to put the emphasis in the wrong place) hence the more succinct version.
- <sup>15</sup> Note that there is much scope for our concern with relational equality to make inroads here. Consider, for instance, how radical inequality can undermine a sense of one’s own value. This does perhaps put some limits on permissible inequality in virtue of our concern with creating conditions conducive to self-esteem, self-respect and the like. But it could also point to the need for developing more psychological resilience in the face of a hostile world. It is not clear which of these paths is recommended. Almost certainly both will have a role to play. Some empirical literature is relevant to making more detailed proposals.