Equality and the Human Condition

I. Introduction

How should we treat the poor, hungry, and downtrodden? What are our obligations to the sick, needy, handicapped, and elderly? How should we act towards women and minorities? What are our responsibilities to developing countries, and more generally, to the world's worst-off?

These are complex questions, to which many different answers have been given. Indeed, there are as many answers to these questions as there are moral outlooks.

I wouldn't presume to prescribe a general answer to such questions. Indeed, I don't even have any specific answers to offer. However, I want to present some of the factors that are relevant to answering such questions insofar as one cares about equality, and to note some of their possible practical implications.

Though limited in scope this project has significant value. While many people are not egalitarians, many others are, or at least think they are. Moreover, those especially vexed by such questions often regard themselves as egalitarians, and believe there is a special connection between the concern for equality and the answers to such questions. In addition, politically and practically, as well as theoretically, countless programs and arguments are couched in egalitarian terms and defended, implicitly or explicitly, by appeal to the ideal of equality.

G.A. Cohen reflects egalitarianism’s powerful galvanizing spirit when he asks, as the title of a recent unpublished paper, "If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?" Cohen implicitly recognizes that while anti-egalitarians may, perhaps, live comfortably with themselves while others are much less fortunate, this is not seemingly an option for committed egalitarians.1
The paper is divided into five sections. Section II presents terminology and basic assumptions. Section III presents my view that the notion of inequality is complex, individualistic, and essentially comparative (these terms will be clarified below), and offers considerations underlying that view. Section IV illustrates possible implications. Section V offers a summary and final remarks.

Section III summarizes material presented elsewhere, hence it will be long on claims and short on arguments. Readers familiar with my previous work on inequality may want to just skim section III, but for the rest that section will be necessary, though oversimplified.

II. Preliminary Comments

I concluded my book, Inequality, with the observation that debate about inequality "has been shrouded in error and confusion. Few, if any, moral ideals have been more widely discussed, yet less well understood (p. 307)." The reasons for this are many, some of which will be given in this paper. Unfortunately, one important reason is that so-called "egalitarians" come in many stripes. Too many I'm afraid. Numerous, quite distinct positions—ranging from socialism, to communitarianism, to Rawls's maximin principle, to utilitarianism, and even to libertarianism—have been described as, or perhaps conflated with, egalitarianism. But of course most of these positions, and their advocates, have precious little in common.

Correspondingly, it is extremely important in any discussion about equality that one be clear about the sense one is using the term. In this paper, I focus on versions of egalitarianism that might be described as comparative non-instrumental egalitarianism. On this view equality is regarded as intrinsically or objectively valuable. More cautiously, on this view one believes that equality is an ultimate or non-derivative value in the sense that one believes equality is not merely valuable insofar as it promotes other
desirable ends or ideals, such as utility, freedom, community, or improving the lot of the worst-off.

Now equality is a relation, people are more or less equal relative to each other, and a comparative concern for equality reflects a concern for how people fare relative to others. Indeed, I believe that the core or fundamental element of comparative non-instrumental egalitarianism is that it is bad for some to be worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own.

Let me add, without argument, that I believe there is an intimate connection between the concern for equality and a concern about fairness. On my view, equality is a subtopic of the more general—and even more complex—topic of fairness. Specifically, concern about inequality is that portion of our concern about fairness that focuses on how people fare relative to others. So, concern for equality is not separable from concern for a certain aspect of fairness; they are part and parcel of a single concern. Thus, egalitarians in my sense believe that undeserved nonvoluntary inequality is bad because it is unfair, and the unfairness consists precisely in being worse off than another through no fault or choice of one's own. Unfortunately, as we will see, it is one thing to hold such a position, quite another to unpack what it all involves.

The intimate connection between what is bad about inequality and unfairness accounts for the importance of the "no fault or choice" clause. On my view, if one assumes that the imprisoned criminal deserves his misfortune—say, because he freely and rationally chose a life of crime despite being fully informed of his action’s consequences and despite having other acceptable alternatives—then the inequality between the criminal and the law-abiding citizen isn’t bad, because such inequality wouldn't be unfair. Likewise, if fully informed parents freely and rationally choose to make their children better off than they are, then the inequality between the parents and children needn't be bad, because such inequality needn't be unfair. (Note, it may remain objectionable for some parents to benefit their children in this way, when others don't.
But the egalitarian objection to this would lie in such factors as there being unfair inequality obtaining between different children, not because some parents would be voluntarily worse off than their children, or than other parents who didn't make similar sacrifices for their children.)

It is worth emphasizing that the crucial notion here concerns the issue of fairness, and choice is relevant insofar as it is relevant to fairness, not vice versa. Thus, if I freely choose to do my moral duty, and this results in my being worse off than others, we might think that I am worse off than others through no fault of my own and that I don't deserve to be worse off than others. For example, it might seem unfair that I should be worse off than others are just because I rightly sacrificed my own interests to save a drowning child. In such a case, we might think that though freely chosen, such inequality was still bad—because unfair—and hence that it should be rectified.3

Next, let me distinguish between unconditional comparative non-instrumental egalitarianism, and conditional comparative non-instrumental egalitarianism.4 On the unconditional view, removing unfair inequality always has some value, no matter what the circumstances. On the conditional view, removing unfair inequality sometimes improves a situation over and above the extent to which it promotes other valuable ideals, but not always. The conditional view is an instance of a general position in moral philosophy that F.M. Kamm has dubbed the Principle of Contextual Interaction, according to which "a property's role, and most importantly, its effect may differ with its context."5 Shelly Kagan ably defends this kind of position in his article "The Additive Fallacy,"6 and there is, indeed, powerful reason to believe that a property can have genuine significance in some settings even if it lacks significance in other settings.

I, myself, incline towards unconditional comparative non-instrumental egalitarianism, but the conditional view will be particularly attractive to those who generally value equality, but worry about the Levelling Down Objection. According to the Levelling Down Objection, egalitarianism entails that in a situation where half are
blind and half are sighted, there would be one respect in which it would be better to put out the eyes of the sighted—because it would be better regarding equality. But, it is claimed, there is no respect in which it would be better to put out the eyes of the sighted, therefore egalitarianism must be rejected.

I have argued that the Levelling Down Objection can, and should, be resisted. But even if one grants that the Levelling Down Objection has force against unconditional egalitarianism, it would not affect a suitably modified conditional egalitarianism. Thus, egalitarians could contend that even if putting out the eyes of the sighted was in no way desirable—perhaps because causing blindness somehow cancels out, and not merely outweighs, the (prima facie) value of equality—there may still be other situations where equality has value beyond the extent to which it promotes other ideals. Given the Principle of Contextual Interaction, the Levelling Down Objection cannot rule out such a position.

I mention the distinction between unconditional and conditional egalitarianism because it is important, yet often overlooked. But I shall not address it further here. The remainder of the paper is compatible with both unconditional and conditional egalitarianism.

All reasonable egalitarians in my sense will be pluralists. Equality is not the only thing that matters to egalitarians. It may not even be the ideal that matters most. But it is one ideal, among others, that has non-derivative normative significance.

Finally, in what follows I sometimes cast my discussion in terms of equality, and sometimes in terms of inequality. I trust that in each case context makes my meaning plain. On my view, the concern to promote equality just is the concern to remove or reduce inequality. These are two ways of talking about the same thing.

III. Equality as a Complex, Individualistic, Comparative Notion
Most philosophical discussions of equality have focused on two questions: Is equality really desirable (in response to which we have the "Yeah Yeahers!" and the "Boo Booers!")? And, if so, what kind of equality should we be concerned with—equality of opportunity, income, welfare, primary goods, access to advantage, need satisfaction, or what? These are important questions. But there are a host of other questions one must also answer if one is a comparative non-instrumental egalitarian. These include the following. When is one situation worse than another regarding inequality? Does inequality matter between groups or between individuals? Does inequality matter differently at high levels than low levels? Is inequality affected by variations in population size? If one compares individuals, should one focus on their lives taken as complete wholes, on simultaneous portions of their lives—say, today’s elderly with today’s youth—or on corresponding segments of their lives—say, today’s elderly with tomorrow’s elderly?

It is important to answer such questions for two reasons. First, it does little good to say we care about inequality of some kind, unless we can, in general, determine when one situation is worse than another with respect to inequality. Second, and even more importantly, it is only by addressing these questions that we fully come to understand the notion of inequality and what we are committed to in endorsing it. Until we fully understand the notion, we are in no position to say whether we should care about equality, and if so, how much.

In *Inequality* I addressed such questions, and in doing so developed a new approach to understanding inequality. On the common view the notion of inequality is simple, holistic, and essentially distributive. On my view the notion of inequality is complex, individualistic, and essentially comparative. Let me next explain these terms, and briefly note some considerations underlying my claims.

**Simple versus Complex**

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Most people—though to their credit not most economists—have thought the notion of equality is simple. They have recognized that there are complicated questions associated with equality—such as whether we should care about it, and if so what kind, and how much. Still, they have assumed that the notion itself was simple. After all, it has been assumed, we all know what equality is, that is where everybody has the same amount of x, for whatever x we are interested in. Likewise, it has been widely assumed that we all know what inequality is, that is where some people have more x than others. What could be simpler?

Moreover, in some cases it is clear how two situations compare with respect to inequality. For example, consider diagram one, where each figure represents a society’s population, with the column heights representing people's welfare levels, and the widths representing the number of people in each group. Also suppose—here and elsewhere—that we decide equality of welfare is what egalitarians should seek.10

Surely B’s inequality, where some are worse off than others, is worse than A’s, where everyone is perfectly equal. Likewise, D’s inequality, where the gap between the better- and worse-off is large, is worse than C’s, where the gap between the better- and worse-off is small. (Here, and throughout, we assume that all people are equally talented, skilled, hardworking, motivated, etc., so the worse-off are so through no fault, or choice, of their own.)

Examples like the preceding are prevalent in people's thinking, but as we shall see next they are extremely misleading. In many cases, it is very unclear how situations
compare regarding inequality. Consider, for example, the set of alternatives that I call the Sequence. This consists of 999 outcomes each containing two groups of people, the better-off and the worse-off. The levels of the better-off are the same in each outcome, as are the levels of the worse-off. Each outcome has the same size population, 1000, but the ratio between the better- and worse-off steadily changes. In the Sequence's first outcome there are 999 better-off and one worse-off, in the second outcome there are 998 better-off and two worse-off, and so on. By the last outcome there is one person better-off and 999 worse-off. The Sequence's first, middle, and last outcomes are represented in diagram two.

THE SEQUENCE

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DIAGRAM TWO

First                          Middle                          Last

How do the Sequence's outcomes compare regarding inequality? On reflection, I think many different, yet plausible, answers can be given to this question.

For example, one way we may judge inequality is in terms of how "gratuitous" the inequality seems. In the early outcomes many are better-off, and only a few are worse-off. In such outcomes the inequality may seem "pointless and unnecessary." If direct redistribution were possible to bring about equality, the better-off would hardly lose anything and the worse-off would gain tremendously. Hence, the inequality in the early outcomes may seem particularly offensive as there seems to be virtually nothing gained by it.
Next consider the middle outcomes, where roughly half of the people are better-off, and roughly half are worse-off. It seems that in the middle outcomes redistribution would "cost" a lot. A large number would have to sacrifice a great deal to achieve equality. In such outcomes we could understand the reluctance of the better-off to redistribute, and while we might think it would be good if they were to voluntarily do this, we might not think they were morally required to do so. In those outcomes, then, the inequality might strike us as more excusable, and hence less disturbing, than the inequality in the first outcome. Finally, consider the end outcomes, where only a few are better-off, and the vast majority is worse-off. In the end outcomes direct redistribution from better- to worse-off would involve tremendous loss for some, with virtually no gain for those thus "benefited." Therefore, the inequality might seem least offensive in the last outcome, where the "cost" of the inequality might seem smallest, and the "gain" highest.

This position might be summed up as follows. Egalitarians will think it unfair if, through no fault or choice of their own, some are badly-off (for example, struggling to survive) while others are well-off (for example, living lives of ease and comfort). But from one perspective, at least, egalitarians may be most offended if just a few are badly-off while the vast majority is well-off, since the inequality then seems particularly gratuitous. Thus, in accordance with this way of thinking, it will seem that the Sequence’s outcomes are getting better and better regarding inequality.

Another reason egalitarians may think the Sequence's outcomes are getting better and better is that it appears to be less and less the case that those who are worse-off are being especially victimized by the situation. In the early outcomes, for instance, it is as if the entire burden of the inequality is borne by those few who are unfortunate enough to be among the worse-off. Given that those few people are much worse off than every other member of their situation, it may seem that they have a very large complaint regarding inequality and, correspondingly, that the inequality is especially offensive. By
contrast, the end outcomes' inequality may seem relatively inoffensive. In those outcomes each member of the worse-off group is as well off as all but a few of the other members of her situation. Hence, in those outcomes it may seem as if nobody has much to complain about regarding inequality.

This view is plausible, and it expresses itself in the way we react to the actions of bullies or tyrants. If a bully or tyrant decides to humiliate certain people, from a utilitarian standpoint we may well hope that it is a small portion of the population that is so mistreated. Nevertheless, from an egalitarian standpoint we may well find the mistreatment most offensive if it applies to only a small segment of the population. Thus, it may seem particularly unfair for a few people to bear the brunt of their world's injustice; and it may seem especially galling that the vast majority should be leading normal happy lives, while one small segment of it gets "crushed beneath the heel of oppression."

One way of putting this point is that certain egalitarian intuitions are especially attuned to instances of invidious or capricious discrimination where a particular person or small number of people is singled out for discriminatory treatment. In fact, I think it is the singling out in this way of an individual or small number that is the paradigmatic case of where we judge a (harmful) discrimination to be grossly unjust or unfair.

There are, then, several ways of thinking that might lead one to think the Sequence's outcomes are getting better and better regarding inequality. But there are also ways of thinking that might lead one to judge that the outcomes first get worse, then better.

It is easy to be drawn to such an ordering by reasoning as follows. In the early outcomes, everyone is perfectly equal except, regrettably, for a few isolated individuals. In those outcomes, then, the worse-off represent an ever-so-slight perturbation in an otherwise perfectly homogeneous system. Therefore, since in the first outcome there is just a slight deviation from absolute equality, that outcome may seem nearly perfect.
regarding inequality. In the middle outcomes, the deviation from absolute equality is much larger. Roughly half the population is much better off than the other half. In the end outcomes, there is once again just an ever-so-slight deviation from absolute equality. Everyone is perfectly equal except, regrettably, for a few isolated individuals. Like the early outcomes, therefore, those outcomes may appear almost perfect regarding inequality. In sum, it seems there is a natural and plausible way of looking at the Sequence's outcomes such that we would judge they first get worse, then better.

Another line of thought also supports the "worse, then better" ordering. In the early outcomes, only a few people have a complaint regarding inequality, so as large as their complaint may be, those outcomes’ inequality may not seem too bad. However, in the middle outcomes, it may seem both that a large number have a complaint (roughly half of the population), and that the magnitude of their complaints will be large (they are, after all, worse off than half the population through no fault or choice of their own). In the end outcomes, on the other hand, the situations may seem analogous to, though the reverse of, the early outcomes. Although almost everyone has something to complain about, it may seem that the size of their complaints will be virtually negligible, as they are each as well off as almost everyone else. Hence, as with the early outcomes, the inequality may not seem too bad.

It seems, then, there are egalitarian reasons to rank the Sequence's outcomes as getting worse, then better, as well as reasons to rank them as just getting better. Still other reasons support ranking them as getting worse and worse.

In the early outcomes, only a few people are worse off than the better-off. In the middle outcomes, roughly half the population is worse off than the better-off. In the end outcomes, virtually everybody is worse off than the better-off. Since the size of the gap between better- and worse-off is the same in each outcome, we may conclude that the early outcomes are the best regarding inequality, and the end outcomes are the worst.
Before going on, let me note two examples where such reasoning seems to be involved. First, if one asks audiences to think of the worst periods of inequality in human history—as I have many times over the years—one of the most common responses is that of medieval Europe. But the common conception of medieval Europe involves a few—kings, queens, and noblemen—living in the lap of luxury, while the vast majority—peasants and serfs—struggle to survive. Such a situation resembles the end outcomes, rather than the early or middle ones. Now people’s intuitive responses here may be partly influenced by non-egalitarian factors; still, I think one reason so many think of medieval Europe as among the worst periods of inequality is that the number of worse-off is so large relative to the fortunate few who are well off. This way of thinking is compatible with the judgment that the Sequence's outcomes are getting worse and worse, but not with the other ways of thinking previously discussed.

Another example where such thinking seems operative is illustrated by a Marxian analysis of the advance of capitalism. On a Marxian view, as capitalism advances more and more people are squeezed out of the ranks of the bourgeoisie into the ranks of the proletariat. Hence, fewer and fewer people come to reap the benefits of capitalism.

Now whatever one thinks of its ultimate accuracy, it must be admitted that as stories go a Marxian analysis of capitalism exerts a strong pull on egalitarian intuitions. Specifically, egalitarians would find advancing capitalism increasingly objectionable for at least two reasons. First, because the rich become richer and the poor, at least relatively, poorer. Second, because the ranks of the worse-off swell and the ranks of the better-off shrink. It is the latter point that concerns us here. It suggests that certain egalitarian intuitions will be increasingly offended as more and more people are worse off relative to the better-off. These intuitions support the judgment that the Sequence's outcomes are getting worse and worse.

This discussion has been vastly oversimplified. But I hope to have conveyed some sense for why I claim inequality is complex. There are many different positions, or
aspects, capable of underlying and influencing our egalitarian judgments. In fact, in *Inequality* I argue that there are at least twelve such aspects. I do not claim each of these aspects is equally appealing. But I do believe each represents elements of egalitarian thinking that are not easily dismissed.

**Holistic versus Individualistic**

Most who learn that I work on inequality immediately ask something like the following: "inequality between whom; blacks and whites, women and men, homosexuals and heterosexuals, or Americans and Ethiopians?" The assumption appears to be that the egalitarian should be concerned about inequality between different *groups* within societies, or between different *societies* themselves.

There are powerful reasons to question this assumption. The notion of inequality has a strong *individualistic* component. Looking at situations, we are capable of making judgments as to which individuals fare better or worse regarding inequality. Thus, for any situation where some are better off than others through no fault or choice of their own, we can say that the best-off have nothing to complain about regarding inequality—since they are already as well off as every other member of their situation. Similarly, the worst-off have the most to complain about regarding inequality—since, by hypothesis, they are worse off than every other member of their situation. Moreover, on reflection, not only can we make judgments about how different individuals fare with respect to inequality, but also our overall judgments regarding inequality are generally based on how individuals fare regarding inequality.

In addition, it seems clear that *groups* or *societies* aren't the proper objects of moral concern, *individuals* are. Thus, although different individuals or social institutions often discriminate against groups, and though, for political and practical reasons we may want or need to focus on groups in responding to such discrimination, our ultimate concern is for the individual members of the affected groups.
While on average whites may be much better off than blacks, some blacks will be much better off than others, and some whites will be much worse off than some blacks. Insofar as one is concerned about inequality, one will favor transfers from better-off whites to worse-off blacks, but should oppose transfers (except, perhaps, for indirect long-term reasons) from worse-off whites to better-off blacks. Likewise, one should favor transfers from better-off blacks to worse-off blacks, or for that matter, from better-off blacks to worse-off whites. Similarly, for the case of men and women, or other cases of general inequality between groups or societies.

So, I suggest that, on reflection, a large component of the egalitarian's concern is individualistic, not holistic.

**Essentially Distributive versus Essentially Comparative.**

I agree that the egalitarian is not merely concerned with how much of a given good there is, but with how that good is distributed. But this doesn't distinguish egalitarianism from a host of other distributive principles that are not merely concerned with how much good there is. For example, one might be concerned with distribution according to need, effort, merit, productive contribution, or in accordance with rights. All such views might be appropriately regarded as distributive, but this doesn't tell you what is truly essential, and distinctive, about them.

As suggested previously, equality is a relation between individuals, and the egalitarian's core concern is with how individuals fare relative to each other. Fundamentally, then, the concern for equality is not so much essentially distributive, as it is essentially comparative. Hence section one's claim that this paper is concerned with comparative non-instrumental egalitarianism.

In sum, I think most have implicitly assumed that the notion of inequality is simple, holistic, and essentially distributive. In fact, I believe it is complex,
individualistic, and essentially comparative. Let us next turn to possible implications of these results.

IV. Implications.

I have claimed there are many plausible judgments one might make regarding the Sequence. These judgments reflect the fact that there may be as many as twelve different aspects underlying and influencing our egalitarian judgments. I have said nothing about what I thought our final, ultimate, judgment should be regarding how the Sequence's outcomes compare regarding inequality. In fact, I believe that overall, that is, taking each of inequality's many aspects into consideration and giving each their due weight, we should probably judge that the Sequence's outcomes first get worse, then better, regarding inequality. So, regarding inequality, overall, the Sequence's middle outcomes will be worse that its earlier and later outcomes. That is, regarding inequality, it is worse, overall, if half the population is much worse off than the other half through no fault or choice of their own, than if most are equally well off, but relatively few are better or worse off.

Let me not defend this claim, which would require more discussion than I can provide here. But suppose it is true, as I shall henceforth assume. I shall argue that while this seems to support many intuitive judgments egalitarians make, it may also have implications many would find surprising and disturbing.

Consider first the common view that in the United States most women are worse off than most men are. Since men and women each represent roughly 50% of the population, one would then think that, regarding inequality, the United States’s situation with respect to men and women resembled one of the Sequence's middle outcomes. Since the middle outcomes are the worst, regarding inequality, that would seemingly explain and license attempts to improve the lot of women. Insofar as one cares about inequality, one would improve the outcome either by raising all women closer to the
men’s level or, short of that, by raising as many women as possible closer to the men's level. Insofar as one did the latter, one would transform society from one resembling the Sequence's middle outcomes to one increasingly resembling the Sequence's earlier outcomes and, overall, the earlier outcomes are better than the middle ones regarding inequality. So, overall, the more women we raised to the men's level the better the situation would become regarding inequality.

Similar considerations seemingly support common views about racial inequality. In the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, most blacks are typically regarded as significantly worse off than most whites. Generalizing, one might assume that white's represent roughly 85% of the population, and black's roughly 15%. (I here ignore other "minorities" in Western societies, many of whom, as with Hispanics in the United States, represent sizeable portions of the population who also tend to fare poorly relative to whites. Ironically, and unfortunately, this ignoring of other groups may accurately mirror how problems of inequality are often viewed in the United States.) On this view the pattern of inequality between whites and blacks will resemble something like the Sequence's 150th outcome, where there would be 850 in the better-off group (85% of the population) and 150 in the worse-off group (15% of the population). Here, as before, if one could reduce the gap between all blacks and whites that would improve the situation regarding inequality. So, too, would raising as many blacks as possible up to the level of the whites. Doing so would increasingly transform the situation from one already resembling an earlier member of the Sequence, into one resembling the Sequence’s earliest members. The latter are amongst the very best of the Sequence’s outcomes regarding inequality.

The preceding suggests that, regarding inequality, people in the United States, Canada, or Western Europe may want to improve their society’s situation by raising as many women and blacks as possible up to the level of white males. Such results will be viewed by most egalitarians as welcome, but hardly surprising. On reflection, however,
these results may be superficial, and not, ultimately, sustainable. As we will see next, much further thought needs to be given to the question of what policies should be promoted, and defended, in egalitarian terms.

Consider situations where the better-off are in the minority. For example, consider the situation of many African nations, where most blacks are typically regarded as worse off than most whites, but blacks may constitute roughly 85% of the population, and whites roughly 15%. Such situations resemble one of the Sequence’s later outcomes, roughly the 850th outcome. This fact has important implications.

Suppose that for various social, political, and moral reasons the better-off are not willing to promote equality by substantially lowering themselves to the level of the worse-off. Then the only feasible way of alleviating inequality would be to reduce the gaps between the better-off—whites—and the worse-off—blacks, by raising the latter to the level of the former. Ideally, one would raise all the blacks up to the white’s level. But this is utopian. It isn’t going to happen, at least not in the foreseeable future.

This raises a host of questions about the most feasible and effective use of social resources to improve the lot of the less fortunate. Perhaps, rather than diluting effort and resources—by spreading them thinly in a futile attempt to improve everyone at once—one should target specific regions, cities, neighborhoods, or groups. The idea would be to gradually raise, in turn, selected members of the worse-off up to the level of the better-off, knowing that not everyone can be helped at once. On such a strategy, many of the worse-off would, for the foreseeable future, regrettably be left behind.

Suppose an African society adopts such a policy in addressing the needs of its worse-off. Even with sincere commitment and effort it might take many years to raise as many as 10% of the worse-off to the level of the better-off, and it might take many more years to raise as many as 25% of the worse-off to the level of the better-off. Thus, if successful, such a policy would transform the situation from one resembling one of the Sequence’s later outcomes—say, outcome 850—into one increasingly resembling the
Sequence’s middle outcomes—perhaps, after many years, outcome 750, and after many more, outcome 600. But if, overall, the Sequence first gets worse and then better regarding inequality, then the result of following such a policy would be that the society would be getting worse regarding inequality, not better.

Many egalitarians, including myself, find the preceding result shocking and dismaying. Most people have assumed that, insofar as they care about equality, they should favor raising worse-off blacks to the level of better-off whites—especially in societies where whites are a distinct minority. But on reflection this assumption may not hold. As we have seen, programs that raise some, but not all, of the worse-off to the level of the better-off may transform a society from one resembling the Sequence’s later outcomes into one resembling the Sequence’s middle outcomes. Overall, this may be worsening the situation’s inequality.

Four comments before proceeding. First, several aspects of inequality would always support raising some of the worse-off to the level of the better-off, specifically, those aspects underlying the judgment that the Sequence is getting worse and worse. But though important and plausible, those aspects are opposed by other aspects, including all those underlying the judgments that the Sequence is getting better and better, or first getting worse, and then getting better. So, while there is plausible egalitarian support for the intuition that raising some, but not all, of the worse-off improves inequality, on reflection that intuition may need to be revised. The situation’s inequality may be getting better in some respects, but not overall.

Second, egalitarians may try to defend policies that aid some, but not all, of the worse-off by appealing to long-term egalitarian aims. Specifically, egalitarians might contend that although such policies would worsen inequality in the short run, they would promote equality in the long run. Eventually the situation’s inequality would start getting better again, as eventually the situation would be increasingly transformed from one like the Sequence’s middle outcomes to one like the Sequence’s earlier outcomes.
This defense of policies aiding some, but not all, of the worse-off is important. After all, people have long recognized that one may sometimes have to first worsen a situation in order to improve it subsequently. Still, people have not previously recognized that such a defense is necessary for the situations I am considering, nor is it obvious that such a defense will ultimately succeed.

Serious attempts to radically transform society are always iffy propositions, and may require many generations to succeed. Given the inconstancy of political will, varying local and worldwide economic conditions, instability in governments, and long-term changes in national identity and political alignments, there are no guarantees that a program embarked on today will survive and bear fruit many years in the future. Indeed, given social, political, and economic realities, it is arguable that the most one could reasonably expect—as opposed to want—would be to ameliorate some of the less fortunate’s worst conditions, and then raise 25%, or maybe—optimistically—50% of the worse-off to the level of the better-off. But then doing this would transform a society that initially started with 15% better-off and 85% worse-off, into one with 36% better-off and 64% worse-off, or, on the optimistic scenario, into one where 57% are better-off and 43% are worse off. This would transform the situation from one resembling the Sequence’s 850th outcome into one resembling the Sequence’s 640th or its 430th outcome. Neither of these situations is likely to be better than the initial one in terms of inequality.

Third, even if one was convinced that eventually the vast majority of people would be in the better-off group, so that the situation would resemble the Sequence’s early outcomes, it is not certain one would be justified in pursuing such a tack in the name of equality. First, there are deep questions about pursuing a policy that will significantly increase inequality within present and near-future generations, for the sake of decreasing inequality in further-future generations. Second, even if such questions could be settled in favor of sometimes allowing such trade-offs, whether one should do so would depend on numerous questions. How long will the worsened inequality last? How
much worse will it be? How much better will the final state’s degree of inequality be than the initial state’s? How long is the final state likely to last? Clearly, answering such questions will require difficult empirical estimates that one is unlikely to be able to make with confidence.

Finally, one might think that we are being misled by the simple two-group Sequence. In the real world where people are at many different levels, perhaps we should raise as many people as possible from the lowest groups up to the middle groups, even if raising them all the way up to the best-off groups would worsen the situation’s overall inequality. Unfortunately, this response won’t work. In *Inequality*, I show that the same considerations that apply to simple two-group situations apply to more complex multi-group situations. The crucial question concerns not the number of better- and worse-off groups, but the relative numbers of better- and worse-off. As long as far more people are in the world’s lowest groups—as, unfortunately, is the economic situation of today’s world—raising some but not all to the level of middle groups will worsen inequality. It just won’t worsen it as badly as raising them to the level of the best-off groups would. Space limitations prevent me from defending this claim here, but interested readers will find relevant discussion in chapter three and appendix B of *Inequality*.

I return in my conclusion to what one might say about the preceding results. But it appears that the natural and “obvious” assumption that insofar as one favors equality one should want to raise as many people as possible from the worse-off group to the better-off group is dubious. It is true that the ideal of equality would support raising all of the worse-off to the level of the better-off. It is also true that the ideal of equality will always support raising the levels of the very worst-off, as long as doing so always decreases the gaps between the worse-off and the better-off, so that no one who is worse-off is “left behind” as others improve. Moreover, as noted, it is true that certain aspects of inequality will always support raising a worse-off person to the level of the better-off. But, overall, raising some, but not all, to the level of the better-off will worsen a
situation’s inequality, if in essence it transforms the situation from one resembling the Sequence’s later outcomes into one resembling the Sequence’s middle outcomes.

Let us now return to the question of egalitarian policies in places like the United States, Canada, or Western Europe. We began by noting how our judgments regarding the Sequence seemingly support the general view that egalitarians should favor raising as many women and blacks as possible up to the level of the better off white males for countries like the United States. But this judgment may rest on an implausibly narrow view of the scope of egalitarian concern. Specifically, it may rest on the view that egalitarians need only be concerned about inequality within countries, not between countries.

Few egalitarians actually hold such a narrow view of equality’s scope. Most egalitarians believe it is unfair for some to be worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own, and that this is true wherever such inequalities arise. On this view, the concern for inequality transcends national boundaries. Inequality matters between countries, as well as within countries. Correspondingly, obligations to the world’s hungry and developing countries are often understood and couched in egalitarian terms.¹²

But, then, consider the situation of the typical women or black in the United States. Although most women and blacks in the U.S. may be worse off than their white male counterparts, they are probably much better off than most of the world’s population—the poverty-stricken “teeming masses” of Asia, Africa, and South America. This raises the serious worry that, from an impartial global perspective, policies aimed at improving the lot of U.S. women and blacks would essentially improve the situation of people who are already amongst the world’s most fortunate. Thus, improving the situation of U.S. women and blacks may succeed in reducing the gaps within the U.S., but only at the cost of increasing the already large gaps between U.S. women and blacks and the world’s vast poor population.
Consider an analogy. Suppose one of the world’s wealthiest men has children who are much wealthier than most, but not as wealthy as their father. If the father shares his wealth with his children, he will make them even better off, with little or no adverse effect on his own well being. This would not reduce the world’s inequality. Improving the lot of some who are already much better off than most does not, overall, reduce inequality. To be sure, the reduced gap between the children and the relatively small number of people initially better off than they are would, to some extent, improve the situation’s inequality, as would any reduction in the gaps between the father and all others initially worse off than he is. But these relatively small improvements in equality are almost certain to be offset by the increased gaps between the children and the vast majority of the population who are worse off than they are.

In sum, one doesn’t reduce the world’s inequality, overall, by improving the lot of those who are already amongst the world’s most fortunate. Thus, taking an impartial or global perspective, raising the level of U.S. women and blacks may not be justifiable in egalitarian terms.

The preceding suggests that egalitarians in the U.S. and other wealthy nations might do better to focus their attention on the world’s least fortunate, some of whom may lie within their national borders, but most of whom will not. Unfortunately, however, worldwide distribution resembles the pattern of inequality discussed for many African nations. Most of the world’s income and wealth is possessed by members of the world’s industrial nations, along with the elite of the developing nations. The vast majority of the world’s population is much worse off. Indeed, roughly 80% of the world’s population is, at least economically, much worse off than the upper 20%. Arguably, then, the world resembles one of the Sequence’s later outcomes, roughly, the 800th outcome, and this raises all of the worries previously discussed.

The world’s better-off are not going to lower themselves to the level of the worse-off. Moreover, given social, political, and economic realities, it isn’t possible to raise all
of the world’s worse-off to the level of the better-off, nor is it feasible to try to improve
the lot of all of the world’s worse-off incrementally. Substantial and lasting progress is
only likely to occur, if at all, as a result of targeted policies of local development. So, the
best one might reasonably hope for is that development will slowly spread—over a long
period of time—through cities, counties, provinces, countries, and eventually global
regions. Thus, policies aimed at improving the lot of the world’s worse-off may, if they
work, successively transform our world from one where 20% are well off into one where
30%, 40%, and then, eventually, 50% are well off. But this would be to successively
transform our world from one resembling the Sequence’s 800th outcome into one
resembling the Sequence’s 700th, 600th, and 500th outcome. Unfortunately, this means
that as our policies to benefit the world’s worse-off succeed, the world may be getting
worse with respect to equality, as the world will slowly be changing from one resembling
the Sequence’s later outcomes into one resembling the middle outcomes.

Of course, egalitarians and others would not want to stop at a situation resembling
the Sequence’s middle outcomes. They would hope that policies aimed at benefiting the
world’s worse-off would continue to raise people to the level of the better-off, until
everyone was basically at the better-off’s level. But it is worth remembering that given
the world’s current population of roughly 6 billion, increasing the better-off group by
even 5% involves drastically improving the situations of three hundred million people. It
is questionable how much we can expect that to happen in the foreseeable future.
Correspondingly, it is dubious whether we can realistically even hope to reach a situation
resembling the Sequence’s middle outcome, much less go beyond it. Indeed, the
prospects for transforming our world into one resembling the Sequence’s early outcomes
is especially bleak when one takes account of the fact that the world’s worse-off
population is increasing at a faster rate than the world’s better-off population.

So, contrary to the common view, policies that succeed in raising some, but not
all, members of the world’s worse-off up to the level of the better-off may actually be
worsening worldwide inequality. Perhaps, if such policies are pursued for a very long time, eventually one will reach a situation resembling the Sequence’s middle outcomes, after which further pursuit of such policies would, if successful, begin to improve the world’s inequality. However, it might take many more years of such improvement before we reached a situation resembling an earlier outcome of the Sequence that was actually better than the initial state we started in regarding inequality. Moreover, as before, even if such a state were eventually achieved, whether it would be worth it with respect to equality is not clear. This would depend on such factors as how long the worsened inequality lasted, how much worse it was, how much better the final state’s inequality was than the initial state’s, and how long the final state might last.

So what is an egalitarian to do? It appears that egalitarians can focus on lowering the levels of the very best off, or raising the levels of the very worst off. But egalitarians can’t simply focus on reducing gaps between some who are better off and others who are worse off. They need to focus on the ways in which reducing gaps between some people affect the size of the gaps between those people and everyone else.

The preceding considerations are relevant to G. A. Cohen’s remarks in his unpublished “If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?” Cohen recognizes that egalitarians feel guilty about how they fare relative to others. They regard it as unfair for some to be worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own, and a fortiori as unfair for them to be the beneficiaries of such unfairness. The title of his paper reflects the powerful and prevalent view that there is a tension between a genuine commitment to equality and being rich. After all, one assumes, one could always promote equality by redistributing one’s resources to those worse off.

However, our discussion casts this prevalent view in a new light. Unfortunately, unless one is willing to simply waste resources, which would be morally objectionable on other grounds, it is not clear what realistic alternatives are available to the committed egalitarian.
I take it the egalitarian can’t actually benefit all of those who are worse off than he is. Nor is he likely to be in a position to ensure that his money or wealth would go to the world’s very worst off. Most likely, the egalitarian could act in ways that would benefit but a small fraction of the world’s worse off. Suppose then that the egalitarian redistributes his wealth so as to benefit 10, 100, or perhaps even 1000 unfortunate people. Suppose even that the egalitarian has redistributed his wealth to the point where he is no better off than the people he has benefited. Cohen assumes that such redistribution would improve the situation’s inequality, hence he asks why committed egalitarians don’t behave accordingly. But note, while egalitarians who act this way may have less reason to feel bad, personally, about how well off they are, if their concern is truly with reducing inequality, it is by no means clear that they should so act.

Such actions would remove the inequality between the egalitarian and the beneficiaries of his transfers. It would also reduce the inequality between the egalitarian and all those others who are not well off, as well as between the beneficiaries of the action and all those others better off. But such actions will also increase the inequality between the egalitarian and others who were initially better off. And, most importantly, it will increase the inequality between the beneficiaries of the action and all the others worse off. If there are far more worse-off than better-off, and the beneficiaries of the action gain more than the egalitarian loses, the net effect may be that the world’s inequality has actually gotten worse, not better. This possibility seems not to have been recognized in Cohen’s discussion.

Importantly, one might pointedly ask variations of Cohen’s question, for example, “If you care about suffering, hunger, or the less fortunate, how come you’re so rich?” The worries I have raised wouldn’t apply to such questions. But in a world where relatively few are better off and most are worse off, the egalitarian’s morally acceptable and realizable options may be much more restricted than most have recognized.
Unfortunately, as we have seen, in our world transferring wealth to some, but not all, of the less fortunate may actually worsen inequality, not improve it.

Considerations such as the preceding may lead us to delve deeper into the “equality of what?” debate, as well as to reexamine the value of equality and its relation to other fundamental concerns. In doing this, it may force us to think long and hard about the human condition, and what really matters most about human existence. Let me next illustrate the importance of taking up the latter issue.

Aristotle claimed that the highest form of human existence was the life of contemplation. Bentham championed a life of pleasure with an absence of pain. Aristotle and Bentham had radically different views about what mattered most about human existence, but both would have agreed that a valuable human existence depends, in fact, on certain basic, fundamental, necessities. Minimally, it depends on physical and psychological preservation, which in turn depends on minimum levels of food, shelter, security, freedom from pain, and good health.

Let us focus on health. Recently, I had a brief bout of food poisoning. It lasted a scant three hours, but during that time I was violently ill. Never do I recall feeling so wretched. I shook with fever and chills, moaned unceasingly, and literally writhed in pain. I counted the seconds, fervently hoping the pain would pass and the waves of nausea would subside. Every five to ten minutes I would force myself to throw up, and this would bring with it a few moments of respite, but within a minute the bile would again begin to build up in my stomach and the cycle of misery would start anew.

While sick, I self-consciously reflected on my state—as perhaps only a philosopher foolishly would. During that time, I was acutely aware of the kernel of truth in the old bromide that “if you don’t have your health you don’t have anything.” I have a wonderful family, good friends, a rewarding job, and interesting long-term projects and commitments; but for three hours they were of virtually no benefit to me. I knew that my state was temporary, but wondered how long such a state would have to go on before one
would simply want to die. I couldn’t imagine living in such a horrible state for even a week, let alone a month, year, or many years. Moreover, I was perfectly aware that my state was surely much better than that faced by the truly desperately ill. Then, and later, I was filled with admiration and compassion for those who courageously face, and somehow endure, a lifetime of chronic pain and illness.

Good health isn’t everything, but it is a lot. Freedom from debilitating illness is more than a necessary precondition to a worthwhile human existence. Arguably, good physical and psychological health constitute a large part of what makes a human life worth living.

The preceding considerations are oversimplified and hardly conclusive, but they are suggestive. Perhaps the most significant gaps are not between the rich and the poor—as large and important as those may be—but between the well and the sick. Consider diagram three.
Diagram three conveys the fact that far more people are poor than rich, that most who are ill are poor, and that a smaller proportion of the rich are ill relative to the proportion of poor who are ill. It also conveys the view that whether one is healthy or ill it is better to be rich than poor, but that it is better to be healthy than ill. Indeed, as drawn, diagram three suggests that while the gaps between rich and poor may be significant, the gaps between healthy and ill are even more significant.

Like this article’s other diagrams, diagram three is vastly oversimplified. It is not drawn to scale, and is merely intended to illustrate a general pattern for which exceptions clearly abound. Still, if one interprets “ill” in diagram three as “seriously or desperately ill,” our preceding considerations suggest that diagram three may accurately represent the relative positions of the world’s better- and worse-off.

Suppose, on reflection, we think the world should be represented somewhat along the lines of diagram three. Diagram three represents a world where most are better-off, those who are lucky enough to be physically and mentally healthy, and a minority are worse-off, those unfortunate ones who are desperately ill. Thinking about matters this way, the world resembles one of the earlier members of the Sequence. This, of course,
has important egalitarian implications. On the view that the Sequence is first getting worse, then getting better, we would improve the world’s inequality by raising as many members of the worse-off ill up to the level of the healthy poor. This would effectively transform our world from one already resembling one of the Sequence’s earlier outcomes into one resembling an even earlier outcome.

Three points regarding the preceding. First, suppose one succeeded in raising all, or most, of the seriously ill up to the level of the healthy poor. This would be a clear improvement relative to the initial starting point—where most were relatively well-off, including the healthy poor, but the seriously ill were not. However, having raised the ill to the level of the healthy poor, one could again look as the world as deeply divided between the better-off, the healthy rich, and everyone else. In this situation, the healthy poor, who were originally counted amongst the better-off, would now count amongst the worse-off. This reflects the fact that equality is an essentially comparative notion, and how well off one is regarding equality is not a function of one’s absolute level of well-being, but of how one fares relative to the other members of one’s world.

Looking at the world this way, it would no longer resemble one of the Sequence’s earlier outcomes. Instead, it would resemble one of the Sequence’s later outcomes, with a small percentage of the population relatively well-off and everyone else relatively poorly off. At this point one would be in the unfortunate predicament described at length earlier. One could not raise some of the members of the (now) worse-off group up to the level of the better-off group without transforming the situation from one resembling the Sequence’s later outcomes into one resembling the Sequence’s middle outcomes. Overall, this would worsen the situation’s inequality, not improve it, at least in the short run.
This is why I noted that egalitarianism would support raising the seriously ill up to the level of the healthy poor. Such benefits would be a clear improvement regarding inequality. Unfortunately, however, egalitarianism would not license raising the seriously ill to the level of the healthy rich. Nor would it license raising the healthy poor to the level of the healthy rich. As indicated, in a situation like diagram three, raising some, but not all, from the level of the healthy poor to the level of the healthy rich would, overall, worsen the situation’s inequality, at least in the short run.

Second, I have focussed on health as a large and necessary component of human well-being. But health alone is not a sufficient component of human well-being, and there may be other components that play similarly central roles in our lives. As touched on earlier, these may include minimal levels of food, shelter, security, and freedom from pain. Moreover, there are other, less tangible, goods like freedom, autonomy, or love without which human lives may be significantly lacking in value.

Unfortunately, here, as elsewhere, there is no substitute for deep and substantial thinking about the nature of the human condition and the good. What are most necessary, central, and valuable for human beings? How are these components of human well-being distributed? Until such questions are answered it is impossible to determine to what, exactly, egalitarians are committed.

Third, our results may have profound practical implications regarding the aims and focus of egalitarianism. To a large extent the current battleground of egalitarianism is an economic one. Egalitarians rely heavily on economists to meaningfully measure disparities in income and wealth, and political programs are developed and advocated with the goal of reducing economic disparities. But if increasing the income or wealth of some, but not all, would actually worsen economic inequality, and if the inequalities that
matter most are actually inequalities of food, health, safety, and the like, then there may need to be a profound shift in the tools, approach, and policies of egalitarianism.

Perhaps egalitarians need to consult doctors, nutritionists, or agronomists. Perhaps they require meaningful measures of serious illness or nutritional deprivation more than measures of economic inequality. Similarly, perhaps the focus of egalitarianism needs to change from efforts to shift the wage scale, alter people’s savings habits, or redistribute wealth, to altering the focus and distribution of medical care, increasing crop yields, or changing patterns of nutritional consumption.

In sum, once one gets clear about what really is most important for the living of a valuable human life, how that is distributed amongst people, and how variations in distribution would actually affect inequality, the assumptions and policies of contemporary egalitarianism may require radical revision.

V. Conclusion

This has been a long paper, so I shall summarize my results before offering final remarks.

In section II, I noted that many different positions have been described as egalitarian, and noted that this paper would focus on comparative non-instrumental egalitarianism. Equality is a relation, and a comparative view reflects a concern about how people fare relative to others. A non-instrumental view treats equality as an ultimate, or non-derivative, value, meaning that equality is not merely valuable insofar as it promotes other desirable ends. I claimed that the core, or fundamental, notion of comparative non-instrumental egalitarianism is that it is bad, because unfair, for some to be worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own.
In section III, I presented considerations that support a new approach to understanding equality. I claimed that equality is commonly regarded as simple, holistic, and essentially distributive, but that equality is complex, individualistic, and essentially comparative. In illustrating equality’s complexity, I constructed a set of outcomes I called the Sequence, and noted that various plausible positions yield different judgments regarding the Sequence. Specifically, I suggested that certain ways of thinking would support the judgment that the Sequence’s outcomes are getting better and better regarding equality, others would support a worse then better ranking, and still others would support a worse and worse ranking. All told, I claimed that there are at least twelve aspects underlying and influencing our egalitarian judgments. I did not claim that each of these aspects is equally appealing, but suggested that each represents elements of the egalitarian’s thinking not easily dismissed.

In section IV, I assumed that, regarding inequality, overall we should probably judge that the Sequence’s outcomes first get worse, and then get better, and considered possible implications of that. I argued that in countries where a minority are well-off and a majority are worse-off, raising some but not all of the worse-off to the level of the better-off might actually worsen inequality not improve it. I noted similar results at the global level, where, economically at least, there are far more “have nots” than “haves”.

Concretely, we saw that in many African countries feasible attempts to improve the economic lot of worse-off blacks are likely, at least for the foreseeable future, to worsen the country’s overall inequality. We also saw that in countries like the U.S., raising the economic status of women and blacks to the level of white males may improve inequality at the local level, but worsen inequality at the global level. Likewise, we saw that feasible global efforts to raise the economic status of the world’s least
fortunate would, if they succeed, almost certainly worsen the world’s overall economic inequality, at least for the foreseeable future. After all, to be effective such efforts would almost certainly have to be focused—so while some were being raised most would be left behind. This would transform the world from one resembling the Sequences’ later outcomes into one more resembling the middle outcomes. Overall, I claimed, such a change would be worse regarding inequality.

Finally, I suggested that perhaps egalitarians should be more concerned about other fundamental elements of human well-being than economic condition. Thus, I noted that gaps between the healthy and the seriously ill may be more significant than those between the rich and the poor, and that this may have important egalitarian implications. For example, if most are relatively healthy, and only a minority is seriously ill, then one might improve inequality between the healthy and ill by curing as many of the ill as possible. This would transform the situation from one already resembling one of the Sequence’s early outcomes into one resembling an even earlier outcome. Overall, this would be an improvement regarding inequality. However, I noted that if the healthy rich are better off than the healthy poor, and fewer in number, considerations of equality might only support raising the seriously ill up to the level of the healthy poor. Unless most of the population could be raised to the level of the healthy rich, increases beyond the healthy poor’s level may worsen inequality, overall.

Much of contemporary egalitarian debate has focussed on economic disparities. This is understandable, given that economic conditions are identifiable, quantifiable, and relatively tractable, and given that there are significant correlations between economic status and other more fundamental elements of well-being such as food, shelter, and security. Still, I suggested that egalitarians need to think carefully about what is really
most fundamental for living a valuable human life, and that doing this may cause a profound shift in the tools, approach, and policies of egalitarianism.

Experience tells me that many of this paper’s readers will, at least initially, accept sections II and III, though with some reservations. But most will have serious worries about section IV, whose implications are striking and not easily accepted.

For example, I suspect that many, including most doctors and health care professionals, will worry about egalitarian considerations playing a role in the focus and distribution of healthcare. They will contend that where issues of health are concerned what matters are factors like need, urgency, availability of appropriate treatment, and long-term prospects, not how one’s health compares with others’ health. More particularly, many will balk at claims to medical care turning on whether the majority of people are healthy or ill (independently of how this might affect cost and availability). Thus, it will be claimed, if only a minority were well and the majority were seriously ill, one should cure as many of the ill as one could. And if, per chance, one could only cure a small percentage, one should not give weight to the claim that this might worsen the situation’s inequality.14

Similarly, many egalitarians will balk at the suggestion that perhaps they should not be especially concerned about large-scale economic inequalities. Surely, it will be contended, egalitarians have not been mistaken all these years in focussing on the huge gaps between rich and poor. Even more, egalitarians may be shocked and dismayed by the claim that, qua egalitarians, they should oppose programs that would raise some but not most of Africa’s poor blacks to the economic level of wealthier whites. How could that be, they will wonder? Similarly, most egalitarians will find it difficult to believe that, qua egalitarians, they should oppose programs that would raise up women and
blacks in countries like the U.S. to the level of their white male counterparts. In addition, most egalitarians will want to defend global programs that significantly improve the lot of some of the world’s worse-off, even if they know that, regrettably, not everyone can be helped, so most of the world will remain poor. In sum, most egalitarians will seek ways of denying section IV’s claims, which fly in the face of longstanding beliefs and commitments.

Ironically, those most likely to be sympathetic with section IV’s claims are the anti-egalitarians. They may contend that section IV accurately reveals egalitarian commitments—and so much the worse for egalitarianism! To anti-egalitarians, people should, perhaps, be concerned with making as many people as well off as possible, but they should never be concerned with how people fare relative to others. While the latter view faces section IV’s unpalatable implications, the former does not.

So how should one respond if one is not simply willing to side with the anti-egalitarian? I’m not sure. There are many moves one might try. One might start by trying to deny section IV’s claims. In doing this one might deny some of the argument’s empirical assumptions, or deny that one can move from considerations about the artificially simple Sequence to meaningful conclusions about the real world. Ultimately, I think both moves are shaky grounds on which to defend egalitarianism.

Another theoretically more satisfying response would be to argue against my crucial assumption that, overall, the Sequence first gets worse and then gets better. If one could defend the claim that, overall, the Sequence is getting worse and worse regarding inequality, one could avoid most of sections IV’s unpalatable conclusions. So, perhaps one could argue in favor of putting special weight on those aspects of inequality that support the worse and worse ordering.
A related move would be to deny section III’s claims. Specifically, one might argue that inequality is not as complex as I have urged, and in particular that one should only accept those aspects of inequality that support the worse and worse ordering. This, too, would enable one to avoid section IV’s unpalatable implications.

These lines are worth careful consideration. But ultimately I believe they will be unsuccessful. Even if the aspects of inequality supporting the worse and worse ordering merit special weight, and even if equality is not as complex as I have claimed, it seems clear that, overall, the Sequence’s last outcome is better than the middle one regarding inequality. After all, the last outcome is almost perfectly equal. In that outcome everyone is exactly as well off as everyone else, except for one single fortunate person. The middle outcome, on the other hand, is sharply divided into a world of “haves” and “have nots”. Such an outcome is not even close to being equal, as half the population is worse off than the other half. Even if we think that the middle outcome is better than the last one all things considered, overall it does not seem better regarding inequality.

Finally, one might try to avoid section IV’s implications by questioning section II’s fundamental assumptions. In particular, one might claim that the paper’s starting point is deeply mistaken, and deny that egalitarians should accept comparative, non-instrumental egalitarianism. Now, undoubtedly, some who regard themselves as egalitarians would make such a move. They would present non-comparative versions of egalitarianism, or instrumental versions according to which equality’s value ultimately lies in its promotion of other valuable goals. But to my mind such views abandon what is most central and distinctive about egalitarianism. In so doing, they concede the fundamental claim of the clear-thinking anti-egalitarian.
So the question remains, how should one respond to section IV’s implications if one isn’t an anti-egalitarian? The simple, if unsatisfying, answer might be that one should swallow section IV’s implications, and take solace in the thought that in doing so one is not committing oneself to any all things considered judgments.

As noted in section II, egalitarians are pluralists. Even committed egalitarians must squarely face the fact that equality is not the “be all” and “end all” of morality. What section IV pointedly illustrates is that, considered by itself, the ideal of equality may have unpalatable implications. But as I have pointed out elsewhere, the same is true of virtually every other moral ideal, including justice, freedom, and utility.

Section IV implies that many positions and programs that have heretofore been advocated in the name of equality may actually be opposed by equality. This is extremely important. Many, including me, will continue to support policies that would improve the economic status of blacks, women, or the world’s poor. Correspondingly, if we believe that such policies would worsen inequality, then there must be other values grounding our support that outweigh our concern for equality, at least in the circumstances in question. It is imperative that we think carefully about what those values are and the role they play in our thinking.

Like everyone else, egalitarians must recognize that sometimes philosophical arguments lead us in directions we would rather not go. But that is unavoidable when one seeks the truth. Unfortunately, the truth is not always as we might like it to be.

There is a common tendency in modern political debate to couch virtually every issue and argument in egalitarian terms. One of this paper’s main lessons is that this is a bad mistake. Even if, as I believe, egalitarianism remains a fundamentally important moral ideal, it is crucial for people to accurately recognize its nature, scope, and
implications—including its limitations. Failure to do this is endemic to modern political
debate, by friends and foes of egalitarianism alike. Unfortunately, this does a grave
disservice to both many pressing issues and the ideal of equality.

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1 Of course, egalitarians are not alone in being “burdened” by the plight of the less
fortunate. Committed utilitarians, humanitarians, and others may also be "burdened" by
their moral views. But some anti-egalitarians, such as libertarians, may have no such
problems, and even utilitarians and humanitarians will be relieved of the egalitarian’s
special sense of guilt about being better off than others are without deserving it.

2 Numerous authors have recognized the importance of fault and choice for egalitarian thinking.
Among the most widely discussed articles on this topic are Ronald Dworkin’s “What is
Equality?” “Part 1, Equality of Welfare,” and “Part 2, Equality of Resources,” Philosophy and

3 I am grateful to Ingmar Persson for alerting me to the possibility of voluntary choices imposing unfair burdens on the morally conscientious. Discussions with Ingmar have also led me to recognize that cases of voluntary supererogation may be especially interesting and problematic, and have convinced me that much more work still needs doing on the connection between fairness and choice.

4 Andrew Williams suggested this distinction to me, as well as the terms “unconditional” and “conditional,” in personal correspondence. Frances Kamm and Seana Shiffrin also recently suggested this distinction to me. I suspect others may also have made this distinction over the years, but unfortunately I don’t recall their names.


8 The wording in this sentence and the next is indebted to Andrew Williams’s helpful correspondence on this point.
The ensuing discussion is largely taken from chapter two of *Inequality*. It is, perforce, greatly oversimplified. Readers interested in further details and arguments are referred to chapter two, or to my original article on the topic, “Inequality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 15, 1986: 99-121; reprinted in *Equality*, edited by Louis Pojman and Robert Westmoreland, pp. 75-88, Oxford University Press, 1997.

This assumption does not affect my arguments. Similar arguments could be constructed for equality of opportunity, income, primary goods, access to advantage, need satisfaction, etc.

I realize that historically there have been significant social differences between the categories of “black” and “colored” in societies like South Africa, but for simplicity I am treating them as a single category here. Likewise, I here ignore the roughly 3% of the population that is Asian in societies like South Africa, as well as other minority segments of the population. My general philosophical point is not substantially affected by such simplifications.

There are many possible views regarding equality’s scope with respect to people, places, and times. However, I cannot discuss these here. This topic is the main focus of my “Justice and Equality: Some Questions about Scope,” in *Social Philosophy and Policy* 12, edited by Ellen Paul, Fred Miller, and Jeffrey Paul, pp. 72-104, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

In accordance with diminishing marginal utility of wealth it will often be the case that a worse-off person will gain more from a transfer of wealth than the better-off person will lose. Of course, this is one place where our discussion assumes that our ultimate concern is not with wealth itself, but with benefits or advantages that wealth can provide.

This is one version of the Levelling Down Objection, perhaps the most prevalent and virulent anti-egalitarian argument. As noted previously, I have argued in various places that the Levelling Down Objection should be rejected (see note seven), and I think this independently of this article’s claims.
See the references given in note seven.