

Prioritarianism and Humanitarianism

Abstract

When a humanitarian organisation is deciding how to allocate its resources, is it morally permissible to choose an option that is expected to yield a larger benefit for a less badly off group, rather than an option that is expected to yield a smaller benefit for a worse off group? Hurst, Mezger, and Mauron have developed an adaptation of Daniels and Sabin’s accountability for reasonableness approach to be used in humanitarian resource allocation. Hurst et al.’s view appears to give equal weight to prioritarian and utilitarian considerations. My view, instead, is that maximisation should be given more weight than priority in the context of humanitarian resource allocation. To make my case, I first argue that deontic prioritarianism, as found in Rawls’s argument for the difference principle, does not apply in the context in question. I then argue that the maximising element in telic prioritarianism should be given more weight than its priority element when the potential beneficiaries have a low well-being level, which is the case in the context of humanitarian resource allocation.

Keywords: prioritarianism; humanitarianism; accountability for reasonableness; Oxfam; John Rawls; Derek Parfit.

My interest here is how much importance prioritarian considerations should be given in resource allocation decisions by humanitarian organisations. Samia Hurst, Nancy Mezger, and Alex Mauron have developed an adaptation of Norman Daniels and James Sabin’s accountability for reasonableness approach for use in humanitarian resource allocation.¹ Hurst et al.’s view appears to give equal importance to prioritarian and utilitarian considerations. Prioritarianism instructs us to maximise weighted well-being, where this weighting reflects the view that the moral value of a gain in well-being is greater the lower the beneficiary’s lifetime expected well-being.² Utilitarianism includes no such weighting. Against utilitarianism, prioritarianism pushes us—with force in proportion to the weighting’s strength—towards choosing a smaller benefit for a worse off person over a larger benefit for a better off person.

I will examine two kinds of prioritarian arguments: deontic and telic. Derek Parfit introduces those terms to distinguish between egalitarians who view certain inequalities as intrinsically bad (telic) and egalitarians who view certain inequalities as unjust (deontic). He notes that the distinction also applies to prioritarianism.³ Telic prioritarianism is the view that well-being improvements are intrinsically more important when they occur at lower levels of well-being; whereas deontic

prioritarianism is the view that improvements at lower levels should be given priority as a matter of justice.

John Rawls's argument for the difference principle will serve as an instance of *deontic prioritarianism*. I will argue that Rawlsian deontic prioritarianism does not apply in the context of humanitarian resource allocation. Arguments by Parfit, Richard Arneson, and Nils Holtug will serve as instances of *telic prioritarianism*. I will argue for a new version of telic prioritarianism where the relative strength of its priority element and its maximising element vary depending on the well-being level of the potential beneficiaries. On that basis, I will conclude that humanitarian resource allocation should be guided more strongly by maximisation than by priority.

An example

Humanitarian organisations do indeed face the dilemma of whether to pursue the larger expected benefit or else help the worse off person or group. Consider Oxfam as an example.⁴ Oxfam began as an emergency relief organisation.⁵ Its work today can be described as involving three main activities: long-term development, emergency relief and disaster prevention, and campaigns and advocacy.

Oxfam's approach is based on the idea that the root causes of poverty are economic and political exclusion. As a result, instead of running its own projects, Oxfam's development work involves supporting local civil society organisations, referred to as 'partners'.⁶ These partnerships have two aims: to help partners strengthen their capacity to be agents of change in their societies; and to help Oxfam learn from its partners so as to continuously improve its understanding of how change happens.⁷ Campaigning and advocacy are done in consultation with partners, the aim being to remove legal and social barriers to economic empowerment and political participation. Of the three main activities, emergency relief efforts are the least partnership-based. Oxfam operates a humanitarian emergency response team that can provide water, sanitation, food, and protection when a crisis occurs. That being said, there is move in humanitarian relief toward more of a focus on local capacity building and disaster risk reduction, which will increase the degree to which relief efforts are run by partners.⁸

How much should Oxfam spend on emergency relief compared to development? How much should Oxfam's campaigning and advocacy focus on furthering its relief efforts compared to its development efforts? The relief work targets beneficiaries who are usually worse off than the beneficiaries of the development work. Oxfam's humanitarian emergency response team gets involved 'when the scale of the crisis outstrips a community's ability to cope.'⁹ Beneficiaries of relief work are people whose ability to meet their basic needs has been blocked or diminished. In contrast, beneficiaries of Oxfam's development work are people whose circumstances make it possible for their economic and political empowerment to be fostered by partners with Oxfam's support. Prioritarianism would therefore conclude that a certain amount of poverty reduction via relief work

has more moral value than an equal amount of poverty reduction via development work; and so prioritarianism would instruct Oxfam to make allocation decisions that have less expected poverty reduction in order to favour relief work over development work.¹⁰ Should Oxfam do this or instead allocate so as to maximise expected poverty reduction?

This is not merely a hypothetical question. *The Power of People Against Poverty* is Oxfam International's Strategic Plan for 2013-2019. The plan sets out six goals and describes how the budget is allocated with respect to those goals.

The biggest part of our program spending will be allocated to our work on Goal 3: saving lives (about 35-40%), Goals 4 and 5: sustainable food systems and fair sharing of natural resources (about 30%). The other three goals will account for the rest (about 30-35%).¹¹

Goal 3 is relief work. Its expected impact is that 'Fewer men, women and children will die or suffer illness, insecurity and deprivation by reducing the impact of natural disasters and conflict.'¹² The plan to achieve this includes 'More effective crisis response, both through Oxfam's own capacity and increasingly through the capacity of other organizations, partners and communities.'¹³ Goals 4 and 5 are development work focusing on economic empowerment. Goals 1 and 2 are development work focusing on political empowerment. Goal 1 is the right to be heard. Goal 2 is advancing gender justice. Goal 6 is campaigning for fairer international financial regulations in order to fund development and universal essential services. Oxfam evidently does make choices about the ratio between relief spending and development spending, and so it is important to think about how much weight should be given to maximisation and priority in such decisions.

Accountability for reasonableness

A position worth considering on the relative importance of prioritarianism and utilitarianism in humanitarian resource allocation is offered by Hurst, Mezger, and Mauron in their adaptation of Daniels and Sabin's accountability for reasonableness approach. Daniels and Sabin's work on resource allocation is well-known and influential. They developed the accountability for reasonableness approach to be used for resource allocation in healthcare systems. They argue that in the context of healthcare resource allocation most people reject both the idea of giving exclusive priority to the most urgent needs and the idea of exclusively maximising total expected benefit.¹⁴ In light of this, they argue that what is required is a fair deliberative process. Their accountability for reasonableness approach aims to specify such a process by means of four conditions: publicity, relevance, revision, and regulation.¹⁵ Hurst et al. modify each of those conditions with the aim of adapting the approach to the context of resource allocation by medical humanitarian organisations.¹⁶

Hurst et al.'s view about priority and maximisation is evident in their discussion of the relevance condition. In its original form, the relevance condition requires that reasons given for limit-setting decisions are ones that can be accepted as relevant by 'fair-minded' people. Hurst et al. modify this into a requirement that

we aim to

retain consistency in our decisions by examining all the plausible principles accessible to us, and systematically choosing the 'least worse' option *on each principle's own terms*.¹⁷

So, if principle X viewed option A as *slightly* worse than option B, whereas principle Y viewed B as *much* worse than A, then A would be deemed the 'least worse' option. In effect, Hurst et al. require us to choose in favour of whichever principle sees a larger evaluative gap between the options.

The two principles that Hurst et al. take to be most significant are prioritarianism and utilitarianism, as shown in the example they discuss.

[C]ountry A is needier than country B; in a prioritarian framework it is likely to be preferred on grounds of fairness as the target of an intervention. However, its infrastructures are also slightly less stable, making an intervention there less likely to be sustainable and decreasing long-term utility to beneficiaries as compared with an intervention in country B. If we apply prioritarian—or egalitarian—principles and start a program in country A, we will thus get a little less benefit as the situation will be less stable in the long term. ... If, however, we apply a utilitarian principle and go to country B, we will be disregarding the greater need of the citizens of country A.¹⁸

Hurst et al. argue that in at least some cases of this sort need should win out over benefit—namely, whenever prioritarianism identifies a larger evaluative gap between A and B than utilitarianism does. This is the sense in which Hurst et al. give equal importance to prioritarian and utilitarian considerations. To assess the defensibility of this, I will now examine prioritarian arguments, beginning with Rawls's argument for the difference principle as an instance of deontic prioritarianism.

Deontic prioritarianism

There are at least three reasons to look at Rawls's argument for the difference principle here. It is the best-known argument in favour of giving priority to the worst off.¹⁹ Daniels takes Rawls as his point of departure in developing his theory of justice for health, of which accountability for reasonableness is a part.²⁰ Hurst et al.'s remark about fairness in the first sentence of the quote above suggests that they have in mind deontic prioritarianism.

The difference principle requires that socioeconomic inequalities be 'to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society'.²¹ Good inequalities have the right mix of incentives and redistribution, such that everyone is better off with these inequalities than they would be if there were complete equality. Bad inequalities make some people worse off than they would be if there were complete equality. A society that succeeds at removing all bad inequalities is described by Rawls as being 'just throughout'. A society that goes further by also increasing good inequalities as much as possible is 'perfectly just'.²² In other words, the difference principle requires that *relative* advantage be decreased (or increased)

whenever doing so would improve the *absolute* advantage of members of the least advantaged economic group. Rawls describes this as being ‘for the benefit of all’, because it requires that every increment of permissible socioeconomic inequality brings improvements for everyone compared to a benchmark of complete equality.²³ When every element of the system benefits all participants, this enables them to see each other and themselves as equals.²⁴

The difference principle gives *absolute* priority to the worst off. There are two ways in which this priority could be absolute: (a) improvements to the lifetime expected well-being of members of any group other than the least advantaged have no moral value, and (b) the moral value of improvements for the least advantaged trump the moral value of improvements for any other. The second of these is Rawls’s view. We can see this by considering the lexical difference principle. It demands first that the life prospects of the least advantaged be maximised, and then those of the second least advantaged, and so on.²⁵ Rawls endorses the lexical difference principle in principle, but concludes that it is not relevant for his concerns, because he defends an assumption of ‘close-knitness’, according to which whenever it is possible to do something that improves the life prospects of a group other than the least advantaged, it is also possible to modify that action so that at least some of the benefit goes to the least advantaged. This is consistent with (b), but not (a).

Rawls’s prioritarianism is a demand of justice and therefore is deontic. It is defended on the basis of a moral analysis of what he calls ‘the political relationship’. Rawls is concerned with the relationship people have as participants in a cooperative system that has three troubling features: (i) participants enter the system involuntarily (e.g., by birth), (ii) the right of exit is not enough to make the system fair²⁶, and (iii) the system yields undeserved inequalities in cooperative benefits and burdens.²⁷ Rawls defends the difference principle and the other elements of his view as being requirements for making such a system just.

Deontic prioritarianism and humanitarian resource allocation

There are two reasons to conclude that Rawls’s prioritarian arguments do not apply in the context of humanitarian resource allocation. The first is that the difference principle was not originally intended to apply in such a context. Justice as fairness is meant to set out the conditions under which a national government’s exercise of political authority over its own members can be considered legitimate.²⁸ A humanitarian organisation is an association in civil society, and although Rawls’s principles do place some constraints on associations, he does not intend the difference principle to govern the internal life of associations.²⁹ The difference principle is part of Rawls’s discussion of *domestic justice* as opposed to *local justice* (which *is* meant to govern associations) and *global justice* (which governs the way national societies ought to treat each other).³⁰ He does not offer a theory of local justice. Further, a humanitarian organisation like Oxfam operates internationally, and so Rawls’s theory of global justice, as developed in *The Law of Peoples*, would

be a better place to look if we were to turn our interest away from his prioritarian arguments and were instead in search of clues about what he would say in general about human resource allocation.³¹

This first reason, however, is perhaps too quick. The reasoning behind a principle may warrant a wider application than its author originally intended. One might have the view that Rawls's arguments have relevance whenever people—regardless of citizenship—are connected by a cooperative system with the three key features described above, and that Rawls's reasoning places demands of justice on any actor able to influence the distribution of cooperative benefits and burdens. For the sake of argument, let us suppose such a view is plausible. Let us suppose, further, that there is a global cooperative system—as a result of world trade and global problems like climate change and communicable diseases—that connects the various parties related to humanitarian organisations: beneficiaries, potential beneficiaries, partners, staff, and donors. In that case, Rawls's arguments would place demands of justice on humanitarian resource allocation. But would those demands include the difference principle? We must look more closely.

Rawls writes that '[w]e cannot possibly take the difference principle seriously so long as we think of it by itself, apart from its setting within the prior principles.'³² The prior principles are well known but worth summarising. There is a basic needs principle that is 'lexically prior' to the liberty principle, because meeting basic needs 'is a necessary condition for citizens to understand and to be able fruitfully to exercise the basic rights and liberties.'³³ The liberty principle includes (i) a guarantee of a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties³⁴ and (ii) a guarantee of the fair value of political liberties, which requires 'fair opportunity to hold public office and to affect the outcome of elections, and the like.'³⁵ The first part of the equality principle requires that inequalities in income and wealth, and authority and responsibility, 'be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.'³⁶ To meet these two demands about fair opportunity, a just society must strive to ensure that people's ability to make use of political liberties and liberties related to school and work is influenced as little as possible by their social class at birth or other social contingencies. The difference principle, being the equality principle's second part, is the last piece of an already robust set of requirements.

The context in which Rawls defends the difference principle has two important features. First, the choice situation includes options where everyone wins. Permitting some to have relatively more enables society to secure absolutely more for those who have relatively less. Second, the life prospects of the least advantaged and all others would already be quite good independently of the difference principle. In addition to basic needs being met and equal basic liberties being secured, a variety of progressive economic and social policies would need to be implemented in order to bring about fair opportunity in politics, school, and work. Consider this situation from the perspective of the members of the second least advantaged group: Although there is always reason to want yet greater

absolute well-being, their desire for improvement would not have very much urgency in this context.

In contrast, humanitarian resource allocation cannot be done by pursuing options that are for the benefit of all, where everyone wins. To do more relief work, Oxfam would need to do less development work, and vice versa. It would be otherwise if one type of work generated profits that could be put into the other, or if one type of work significantly increased Oxfam's ability to fundraise for the other, but that is implausible. Having to choose one option at the cost of the other is to be expected in humanitarian resource allocation.

Further, the second feature described above is not the case in humanitarian resource allocation. Potential beneficiaries of Oxfam's relief work are badly off in terms of absolute well-being, and this is true also of potential beneficiaries of Oxfam's development work, despite being less badly off. For both of them, well-being improvements have great urgency.

In justice as fairness, meeting basic needs is prior to the difference principle, and so must be satisfied well before Rawls's deontic prioritarian considerations come into play. Unfortunately, Rawls's remarks about a basic needs principle do not address how to choose in situations of the sort Oxfam regularly faces, where all seizeable options will leave many people's basic needs still unmet. If a Rawlsian basic needs principle were to be further elaborated, is there reason to think that it would include prioritarian requirements? Recall that Rawls wrote that '[w]e cannot possibly take the difference principle seriously so long as we think of it by itself, apart from its setting within the prior principles.'³⁷ Rawlsian fairness supports prioritarianism only in a context that is importantly different from humanitarian resource allocation. Rawlsian deontic prioritarianism does not support Hurst et al.'s view that prioritarian and utilitarian considerations should be given equal weight.³⁸

Telic prioritarianism

Let us now consider telic prioritarianism. Just as telic egalitarianism claims that equality is intrinsically good, telic prioritarianism claims that well-being improvements are intrinsically more important when they occur at lower absolute levels. There are three features of telic prioritarianism worth noting here.

First, telic prioritarianism is non-relational. Suppose that A has a well-being level of 10 and that this is absolutely low. The non-relational feature of telic prioritarianism asserts that the badness of A being at 10 when everyone else is at 50 is exactly the same as the badness of A being at 10 when everyone else is at 5. 'The moral ground for helping someone is the badness of their situation, not any determination of how one person's situation compares with another's.'³⁹

Second, telic prioritarianism is pluralist, containing a priority element and a maximising element.⁴⁰ This yields a demand to maximise weighted well-being, where this weighting comes from the prioritarian claim that the moral importance of a well-being improvement is greater the lower the person's lifetime expected well-being.⁴¹

Third, the priority element of telic prioritarianism expresses an impersonal value. Holtug explains that prioritarianism

implies that a benefit of a fixed size has a higher moral value if it falls at a low level of welfare than if it falls at a high level. But this extra value that is realised at the low level is not a value *for anyone*.⁴²

If the extra value was a value for the beneficiary, then the size of the two potential benefits would not be equal, which goes against the key prioritarian claim that same-sized benefits can have unequal moral value.

To illustrate the third feature, imagine you could either do something that would lead to A's well-being increasing from 10 to 15, or else do something that would lead to B's well-being increasing from 30 to 35. (These numbers describe same-sized benefits to A and B, taking into account factors like the diminishing marginal utility of resources.) This gives two possible outcomes:

	Status quo	Outcome 1	Outcome 2
A	10	15	10
B	30	30	35

A telic egalitarian would prefer the first outcome because it has less inequality, but telic prioritarianism rejects this consideration. Let us consider the two elements of telic prioritarianism. The maximising element tells us to compare how good *for A* it is to move from 10 to 15 and how good *for B* it is to move from 30 to 35. The benefits are the same size. The priority element asserts that A's improvement has more moral value than B's *even though A's improvement is not larger*. That italicised part means that A's improvement would be not be better *for A* than B's improvement would be *for B*. The source of this extra moral value must be something else, an impersonal value.

The impersonal value in the priority element

Given the remarks just made, how do we make sense of Arneson's remark that '[t]he moral ground for helping someone is the badness of their situation'?⁴³ I believe we must distinguish between (a) how bad *for A* it is to be at a well-being level of 10 and (b) how bad it is that a person—any person—is at 10. The badness described in (a) is taken into account by the maximising element of telic prioritarianism, because it is about how bad things are *for A*. That badness is taken into account in the measurement of the size of the potential benefit. The badness described in (b) must come, at least in part, from something else. In other words, in order for the priority element of telic prioritarianism to work, it must be possible to say that the fact that anyone is at 10 is bad not only because of how bad this is for those people. To make sense of this, we need to look into what reason(s) could be given in support of the extra moral value seen by the priority element.

Roger Crisp and Holtug suggest that this is to be explained by the virtue of compassion.⁴⁴ We have more compassion, they argue, for a person who is very badly off than for someone who is less badly off.⁴⁵ However, I do not think that compassion is the right concept to explain this. Compassion is about one person having feelings that to some degree match another person's feelings. The target of

compassion is thus how well or badly things are going for the other person. If compassion were to tell us to help A rather than B, it would be from a feeling that staying at 10 is worse *for A* than staying at 30 is *for B*. But to explain the priority element, we must look for an explanation that does not target what is already accounted for in the maximising element. It must be about something other than how bad *for A* it is to be at 10.

I am not sure what the impersonal value in the priority element of telic prioritarianism is. There are two points that in combination may lead the way to an answer.

First, when discussing compassion, Holtug describes a desire to not leave the worse off behind.⁴⁶ It might be possible to give this thought a prioritarian reading that is not about compassion. Consider the choice involving A and B and suppose that the decision is up to B. B might judge that A becoming able to enjoy something that B is already privileged to enjoy is more important than B gaining further enjoyments. In order to lead us to an answer to the present question, B must not believe that moving from 10 to 15 would be better *for A* than moving from 30 to 35 would be *for B*. That reason is prioritarian, but not impersonal. Further, B must not believe that the inequality between A and B is intrinsically bad. That reason is impersonal, but not prioritarian. Perhaps a concept like *fellowship* might describe the kind of reason we are looking for. This would work only if (1) B could desire fellowship with A and yet not believe that inequality between them is intrinsically bad, and (2) a desire for fellowship would give B reason to judge that A becoming able to enjoy something that B is already privileged to enjoy is more important than B receiving a same-sized benefit that yields further enjoyments.

Second, consider this from Parfit:

We do of course think it bad that some people are worse off. But what is bad is not that these people are worse off than *others*. It is rather that they are worse off than *they* might have been.⁴⁷

Keeping the last sentence of the quote in mind, consider again two situations: A at 10, everyone else at 50; and A at 10, everyone else at 5. To explain the impersonal value in the priority element, we want to understand how it can be bad that A is at 10 without appealing to how bad *for A* it is to be at 10. More specifically, we need to say that being at 10 when everyone else is at 50 is neither better nor worse *for A* than being at 10 when everyone else is at 5, and we need to say that moving from 10 to 15 when everyone else is at 50 is neither better nor worse *for A* than moving from 10 to 15 when everyone else is at 5.

Parfit's final sentence in the quote suggests that A being at 10 is bad insofar as A might have had a higher absolute level of well-being. If everyone else is at 50, this fact indicates that A indeed might have been absolutely better off; whereas if everyone else is at 5, this fact indicates that A might already be as absolutely well off as is feasible. To be clear, we are not saying that it is bad if A has less than what everyone else has. Rather, we are saying that it is bad if A has less than what A might have had; and, further, that how well off others are is relevant to that counterfactual.

But how can we say that it is bad if A has less than what A might have had

without saying that this is bad *for A*? Holtug's point may help. Perhaps A being at a lower level than A might have been is bad insofar as it was caused by A having been left behind. A desire for fellowship would then result in priority for A when everyone else is at 50, but not when everyone else is at 5, without appealing to how bad or good things are *for A*. I will not argue for this view, but it presents a possibility for the impersonal value in telic prioritarianism.⁴⁸

Regardless of whether fellowship is the impersonal value in question, there is a key feature to note. The maximising element of telic prioritarianism has to do with considerations about how good or bad things are *for a person*, whereas the priority element of telic prioritarianism has to do with considerations that are impersonal.

Assessing the strengths of the two elements

It is commonly recognized that different versions of telic prioritarianism can assign different weights to the two elements.⁴⁹ The result of this is the possibility of versions where the choice would be almost always determined by the same element. On that view, within any given version of telic prioritarianism, the weights for each element would be constant. In contrast, I will argue that their weights should vary within one version.

Imagine four potential beneficiaries with names that describe their absolute level of well-being: *very badly off*, *badly off*, *well off*, and *very well off*. Consider two choice situations:

1. A smaller benefit for *very badly off* or a larger benefit for *badly off*.
2. A smaller benefit for *well off* or a larger benefit for *very well off*.

According to my version of telic prioritarianism, in (1) we should choose the larger benefit for *badly off*, and in (2) we should choose the smaller benefit for *well off*. My view rests on two claims.

First, **the absolute strength of the priority element (i.e., its strength when considered independently and not in comparison to the maximising element) depends on how great the distance is between the current absolute well-being of the relatively worse off potential beneficiary and how well off they might have been.** Consider three choice situations:

- A. A smaller benefit for *very badly off* or a larger benefit for *badly off*.
- B. A smaller benefit for *very badly off* or a larger benefit for *well off*.
- C. A smaller benefit for *very badly off* or a larger benefit for *very well off*.

Intuitively, it seems that the priority element would be strongest in C and weakest in A. But we must examine this intuition. It cannot be because the distance between the two potential beneficiaries is greater in C than in A; that would be a telic egalitarian reason. Recalling Parfit's point, the relevant consideration is the extent to which *very badly off* is worse off than they might have been. The intuition, if it is correct, must, then, be based on the assumption that the 'smaller benefit' in C would be larger than the 'smaller benefit' in A. In other words, the distance between *very badly off*'s current and potential absolute well-being is greater in C

than in A. If that is so, then *very badly off* has been left behind in C in a way that is more severe than in A. We could say, then, that C (before any benefit) exhibits a greater lack of fellowship than A. On the other hand, if the assumption is incorrect, such that the benefit that is possible for *very badly off* is the same size in all three situations, then the intuition was mistaken. In that case, the strength of the priority element would be the same in A, B, and C.

To illustrate further, consider two more choice situations:

D. A small benefit for *very badly off* or a large benefit for *very well off*.

E. A medium benefit for *very badly off* or a large benefit for *badly off*.⁵⁰

The priority element tells us to give priority to *very badly off* because of how their current well-being falls short of their potential well-being. It does not matter how their well-being compares to others' (for that would be an egalitarian reason). And so, although intuition might tempt us to think otherwise, the priority element, considered on its own, is stronger in E than in D. We are led to this view about the priority element by taking seriously the thought that it does not depend on any comparisons of relative well-being. It is interesting to note that, almost paradoxically, what strengthens the imperative to give priority to the worse off is the size of their benefit.

My second claim is that **the absolute strength of the maximising element depends on how low the absolute well-being of the relatively better off potential beneficiary is**. Consider again the three choice situations:

A. A smaller benefit for *very badly off* or a larger benefit for *badly off*.

B. A smaller benefit for *very badly off* or a larger benefit for *well off*.

C. A smaller benefit for *very badly off* or a larger benefit for *very well off*.

Let us suppose that the 'larger benefit' is the same size in all three situations. One might be tempted to conclude, then, that the strength of the maximising element is the same in all three, since maximization seeks the largest benefit. We must, again, examine this thought—specifically, the reasoning behind the imperative to maximise. This imperative is not an impersonal value; rather, it is the result of concern for how well off or badly off people are. Personal concern about how things are going for people drives the desire for consequences that increase expected well-being as much as possible. To take this into account, we should say that, although the maximising element always demands that we maximise, the strength of that imperative does not depend only on the size of the benefit. The personal concern for how well things are going for people will be engaged more strongly when things are going poorly for the potential beneficiary. For that reason, the absolute strength of the maximising elements (i.e., its strength when considered independently and not in comparison to the maximising element) is greatest in A and weakest in C.

To illustrate further, consider two more choice situations:

F. A small benefit for *well off* or a large benefit for *very well off*.

G. A medium benefit for *very badly off* or a large benefit for *very well off*.

If we were determining the strength of maximising element *relative to* the strength

of the priority element, the differences between the worse off potential beneficiaries in these two situations would make a difference. However, at the moment we are considering the absolute strength of the maximising element. The strength of the desire to secure the larger benefit depends on how strongly our personal concern is activated by how things are for the beneficiary of maximisation. For that reason, the absolute strength of the maximising element is equal (and weak) in F and G.

One might be tempted to think that this is a defense of a prioritarian tie-breaker rule to be added to a maximisation rule. That description is not quite right. The role of the maximising element in telic prioritarianism is to account for personal value—i.e., the concern we ought to have for how well or poorly things are going *for people*; in contrast with the impersonal value (which might be fellowship) that is accounted for by the priority element. The absolute strength of the maximising element is affected by the absolute well-being of the better of potential beneficiary not because of something addition to the desire to maximise, but rather because of the reasons that are internal to that desire. It is interesting to note that, again almost paradoxically, what strengthens the imperative to maximise is how absolutely badly off the beneficiary of maximisation is.

Let us now return to the first two choice situations:

1. A smaller benefit for *very badly off* or a larger benefit for *badly off*.
2. A smaller benefit for *well off* or a larger benefit for *very well off*.

Let us suppose that the distance between the current absolute well-being of *very badly off* and *badly off* is the same as the distance between *well off* and *very well off*. Let us also suppose that the ‘smaller benefit’ in both cases is the same size, and likewise with the ‘larger benefit’. According to the standard view, the relative strength of the priority element and the maximising element are fixed within a version of telic prioritarianism, even though they vary across versions. This would mean that a version would choose either the larger benefit in both situation or the worse off beneficiary in both. I have argued that when we examine the priority element and the maximising element more closely, we have reason to adopt a different view. On my view, although the priority element has the same absolute strength in both situations, the absolute strength of maximising element is strong in (1) and weak in (2). For that reason, I choose maximisation (i.e., the larger benefit for *badly off*) in (1) and priority (i.e., the smaller benefit for *well off*) in (2).

Telic prioritarianism and humanitarian resource allocation

Let us now consider how telic prioritarianism applies to humanitarian resource allocation.

My choices regarding (1) and (2) above are the result of thinking about the difference in the source of value for the priority element and the maximising element. Recall that the maximising element takes into account how well or badly things are going for the person and to what extent a potential benefit would be good for a person, whereas the priority element is based on an impersonal value.

These considerations lead us to ask the following question when confronted with a choice situation: Is this a situation in which our moral thinking should be moved more by concern for how things are going for a person or by a desire to express an impersonal value (e.g., fellowship)?

My view is that when the situation involves two potential beneficiaries at low levels of well-being, then our moral thinking should be moved more by concern for how things are going for them. This means giving more (although not absolute) weight to the maximising element. This explains my choice in (1). Conversely, when the situation involves two beneficiaries at high levels of well-being, our moral attention does not need to be focused on how things are going for them and can instead be moved more by impersonal values, such as fellowship. This means giving more (although not absolute) weight to the priority element, which explains my choice in (2).

Let us apply this to the question of how much Oxfam should spend on relief work compared to development work. To be more specific, imagine a hypothetical scenario. Suppose Oxfam is already doing relief work in a community under challenging circumstances that make poverty reduction difficult but not impossible. The choice to be made is whether to intensify these relief efforts or instead scale up support for a partner doing successful development work elsewhere. My aim is not to identify the correct decision. Rather, I want to figure out what view we should have about the relative strength of the priority element and maximising element when thinking about this choice. Hurst et al.'s view suggests that we should decide according to whichever element sees a larger evaluative gap between the two options. This is to give the two elements equal weight. I do not agree. My view is that the maximising element should be given more weight in this case because it is a case where our moral thinking should be moved less by impersonal values and more by how things are going for the beneficiaries, since they are at low levels of well-being.

Conclusion

Humanitarian organisations can be expected to face choice situations where need and benefit pull in opposite directions. I have argued that it is appropriate to give more weight to maximisation than priority in the context of humanitarian resource allocation.

My argument proceeded in two stages. The first stage examined deontic prioritarianism in the form of Rawls's argument for the difference principle. I concluded that Rawlsian deontic prioritarianism does not apply in the context of humanitarian resource allocation because (i) the difference principle is defended in a context where everyone can win, and this is not the case for humanitarian resource allocation, and (ii) the difference principle is defended in a context where everyone is already well off, whereas the potential beneficiaries of humanitarian resource allocation are badly off.

The second stage of my argument examined telic prioritarianism as found in arguments by Parfit, Arneson, and Holtug. I argued, first, that the absolute strength of the priority element depends on the distance between the current and potential absolute well-being of the relatively worse off potential beneficiary. It does not depend on whether their current well-being is high or low, or on the distance between their current well-being and that of the relatively better off potential beneficiary. Second, I argue that the absolute strength of the maximising element depends on how low the absolute well-being of the relatively better off potential beneficiary is. This is because the maximising element is motivated by personal concern for how well or poorly things are going for people. The combination of these two claims yields the conclusion that the maximising element should be given relatively more weight in cases involving potential beneficiaries at low levels of well-being, and the priority element should be given more weight when the potential beneficiaries are already well-off.

All of this lends support to the view that humanitarian organisations can, in good conscience, make funding decisions with an eye to having the largest impact.

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¹ Samia A. Hurst, Nancy Mezger, and Alex Mauron, 'Allocating Resources in Humanitarian Medicine', *Public Health Ethics*, 2, 1 (2009): 89-99; Norman Daniels and James E. Sabin, *Setting Limits Fairly: Learning to Share Resources for Health*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). For some other discussions of humanitarian resource allocation, see, e.g., Lisa Fuller, 'Justified Commitments? Considering Resource Allocation and Fairness in Médecins Sans Frontières-Holland', *Developing World Bioethics*, 6, 2 (2006): 59-70; Saroj Jayasinghe, 'Faith-Based NGOs and Healthcare in Poor Countries: A Preliminary Exploration of Ethical Issues', *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 33, 11 (2007): 623-626; Christina Sinding, Lisa Schwartz, Matthew Hunt, Lynda Redwood-Campbell, Laurie Elit, and Jennifer Ranford, "'Playing God Because You Have To": Health Professionals' Narratives of Rationing Care in Humanitarian and Development Work', *Public Health Ethics*, 3, 2 (2010): 147-156; Nathan Ford, Rony Zachariah, Ed Mills, and Ross Upshur, 'Defining the Limits of Emergency Humanitarian Action: Where, and How, to Draw the Line?', *Public Health Ethics*, 3, 1 (2010): 68-71.

² Derek Parfit, *Equality or Priority?* The Lindley Lecture (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1991); Derek Parfit, 'Equality and Priority', *Ratio*, 10, 3 (1997): 202-221; Derek Parfit, 'Another Defence of the Priority View', *Utilitas*, 24, 3 (2012): 399-440; Richard Arneson, 'Luck Egalitarianism and Prioritarianism', *Ethics*, 110, 2 (2000): 339-349; Richard Arneson, 'Egalitarianism', in Edward N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer

2013 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/egalitarianism/>; Nils Holtug, 'Prioritarianism', in Nils Holtug and Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen (eds.) *Egalitarianism: New Essays on the Nature and Value of Equality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), pp. 125-156.

³ Parfit, *Equality or Priority?*, p. 20.

⁴ I owe thanks to Meyer Brownstone for correspondence. Dr. Brownstone has been involved with Oxfam Canada since its inception, as the first chair of the Ontario region in 1967 and later as the chair of Oxfam Canada for seventeen years, during which time he helped form the constitution of Oxfam International. He was awarded the Pearson Medal of Peace in 1986. He is currently chair emeritus of Oxfam Canada. There is arguably no better source on Oxfam Canada than Dr. Brownstone.

⁵ For an account of Oxfam's history, with a UK focus, see Maggie Black, *A Cause for our Times: Oxfam, the First 50 Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁶ Deborah Eade, *Capacity-Building: An Approach to People-Centred Development* (Oxford: Oxfam 1997).

⁷ Oxfam Canada. 'Oxfam Canada Partnership Policy', online, February 25, 2011, <http://www.oxfam.ca/our-work/our-approach/partnership-policy>.

⁸ Edmund Cairns, 'Crises in a New World Order: Challenging the Humanitarian Project', online, February 7, 2012, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/crises-new-world-order>; Tara R. Gingerich and Marc J. Cohen. 'Turning the Humanitarian System on its Head: Saving Lives and Livelihoods by Strengthening Local Capacity and Shifting Leadership to Local Actors', website, July 27, 2015, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/turning-humanitarian-system-its-head>.

⁹ Oxfam Canada, 'Oxfam's Work in an Emergency – Saving and Protecting Lives', online, March 22, 2014, <https://www.oxfam.ca/our-work/emergencies/erf>.

¹⁰ The remarks just made suggest a fairly sharp line between relief work and development work. We should be careful not to overstate the extent to which these two activities occur separately. If an Oxfam-supported project begins as emergency relief, the hope is that it can be carried out in ways that enable the project to progress into economic and political empowerment. But this is not always the case.

¹¹ Oxfam, *The Power of People Against Poverty: Oxfam Strategic Plan, 2013-2019*, online, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/countries/oxfam-strategic-plan-2013-2019-power-people-against-poverty>, p. 30.

¹² Oxfam op. cit., p. 17.

¹³ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁴ Daniels & Sabin op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁶ Hurst et al. op. cit., p. 95. The four conditions, in their original and modified forms, are as follows. (1) The publicity condition requires that all limit-setting decisions and the reasons given to justify them are made public. Hurst et al. relax this requirement for humanitarian contexts, such that the requirement extends only to an organisation's staff and anyone with whom they come into contact. (2) The relevance condition requires that reasons given for limit-setting decisions are ones that can be accepted as relevant by 'fair-minded' people. Hurst et al. argue that this requires a 'consistent reasoning strategy', according to which a conflict between need and benefit would be adjudicated by comparing the need-related sacrifice (using a prioritarian standard giving priority to need) with the benefit-related sacrifice (using a utilitarian standard aiming to maximise benefit).

(3) The revision condition requires all limit-setting decisions to be open to future appeals and revisions. Hurst et al. argue that in humanitarian contexts, an organisation's staff must advocate on behalf of local populations who are disenfranchised, rather than relying on local appeals to prompt revision. (4) The regulative condition requires regulation of the other three conditions. Hurst et al. argue that humanitarian organisations must self-regulate and publicise how this is carried out.

¹⁷ Hurst et al. op. cit., p. 96; emphasis in the original.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 96-97.

¹⁹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Erin Kelly (ed.) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

²⁰ Norman Daniels, *Just Health: Meeting Health Needs Fairly* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²¹ Rawls, *Restatement*, p. 43.

²² Rawls, *Theory*, p. 68. If justice as fairness only required the removal of bad inequalities, then it would be a form of deontic egalitarianism. The demand to increase good inequalities shows a prioritarian concern with the absolute advantage of the worst off.

²³ In its most general form, Rawls's view, on page 54 of *Theory*, is that 'Injustice ... is simply inequalities that are not to the benefit of all'.

²⁴ On page 130 of the *Restatement*, Rawls writes: 'We hope that even the situation of the least advantaged does not prevent them from being drawn into the public world and seeing themselves as full members of it, once they understand society's ideals and principles and recognize how the greater advantages achieved by others work to their good.'

²⁵ Rawls, *Theory*, p. 72.

²⁶ On pages 93 and 94 of *Theory*, Rawls argues that the cost to any citizen of emigrating is so great (in terms of losing one's cultural context) that a person's choice to remain in a country is not considered voluntary. There is thus an inherent tension between political membership and a person's sense of themselves as being free. The only way to resolve this tension is for the cooperative system to be governed by principles that enable citizens to see themselves and each other as equals. Rawls calls this 'the outer limit of our freedom'.

²⁷ Considering desert, the members of more advantaged groups are people who (i) are born with considerable natural aptitudes, (ii) have a desire and capacity for hard work, (iii) choose to direct their hard work toward developing their natural gifts into marketable skills, and (iv) choose to put their skills to use in socially valued ways. Each of those factors is affected to a significant degree by luck. This is obvious for the first. See page 87 of *Theory*. The second is significantly influenced by upbringing, as seen on page 89 of *Theory*: 'fortunate family and social circumstances for which he can claim no credit'. Success on the fourth requires success on the third, which in turn requires good luck for the first and second.

²⁸ For arguments that the difference principle should apply globally, see Charles Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Mark C. Navin, 'Global Difference Principle', in Deen K. Chatterjee (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Global Justice* (Springer Netherlands, 2011), pp. 402-404, DOI: 10.1007/978-1-4020-9160-5_10.

²⁹ Concerning such constraints, churches, for example, must not violate freedom of conscience, and family norms must not impede fair equality of opportunity. See pages 10 and 11 of the *Restatement*. For critical discussion of this feature of Rawls's view, see Angie

Pepper, 'A Feminist Argument against Statism: Public and Private in Theories of Global Justice', *Journal of Global Ethics*, 10, 1 (2014): 56-70.

³⁰ Rawls, *Restatement*, p. 11.

³¹ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). I thank Eric Palmer for raising this point.

³² Rawls, *Restatement*, p. 46, note 10.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 44, note 7.

³⁴ These include freedom of thought, political liberties (such as the right to vote and run for office), liberty of conscience, and freedom of association, as well as 'the rights and liberties specified by the liberty and integrity (physical and psychological) of the person; and, finally the rights and liberties covered by the rule of law', stated on page 44 of the *Restatement*.

³⁵ Rawls, *Restatement*, p. 149.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁷ Rawls, *Restatement*, p. 46, note 10.

³⁸ One place to look for theoretical resources that could perhaps be developed into a different kind of argument for prioritarian duties is Joshua Cohen and Charles Sabel, 'Extra Rempublicam Nulla Justitia?', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 34, 2 (2006): 147-175.

³⁹ Arneson, 'Prioritarianism', pp. 343-44.

⁴⁰ Prioritarianism can be combined with other commitments as well, such as the desert element in Arneson's version.

⁴¹ Arneson, 'Egalitarianism'.

⁴² Holtug, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

⁴³ Arneson, 'Prioritarianism', pp. 343-44.

⁴⁴ Roger Crisp, 'Equality, Priority, and Compassion', *Ethics*, 113, 4 (2003): 745-63; Holtug *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Crisp's view is a limited form of prioritarianism that is combined with a sufficientarian approach. He argues that compassion ought to be felt only for people below a certain threshold of well-being. Above that threshold, he rejects prioritarian considerations.

⁴⁶ Holtug *op. cit.*, p. 150.

⁴⁷ Parfit, *Equality or Priority?*, p. 22.

⁴⁸ If we say that the priority element's impersonal value is fellowship, does this make telic prioritarianism relational? Yes and no. No, in the sense that it does not run afoul of the non-relational feature discussed above, because that feature was about how bad for A it is to be at 10, whereas fellowship is an extra moral value that is not about how bad or good things are for A or B. Yes, in the sense that the extra moral value is affected indirectly by the situation of others.

⁴⁹ Arneson, 'Egalitarianism'.

⁵⁰ Let us assume that if *very badly off* were to receive the medium benefit, they would still be relatively worse off than *badly off*.