

## *Session VII*

### *Prioritarianism*

Matthew Adler and Hilary Greaves  
Discussant: Jerry Green

#### *Antiprioritarianism*

Hilary Greaves defines Prioritarianism as the view that demands giving priority to the worst off, in which the ordering of distributions matters when aggregating welfare (an issue which utilitarianism avoids when the set of distributions has the same summed utility). However, Greaves believes that we need to express this Prioritarian logic with more precise theory, and specifically, that Prioritarians must specify what is meant by the “size” of a benefit in a distribution.

Modern Prioritarians have shifted from what Greaves calls “Primitive Prioritarianism” to what she calls “Technical Prioritarianism,” in which a benefit’s size is merely the increase in von Neumann-Morgenstern utility. She argues that this move is counterproductive for the Prioritarian for several reasons. One argument she advances constructs a theory using the methods of the modern Prioritarians but substituting the logic of “caution under risk” for the logic of “priority to the worst off.” With this strategy, she shows that one achieves a theory that is at odds with that of Technical Prioritarianism. Since both intuitions are reasonable, she claims that the Technical Prioritarian must conclude that the method—which of course is also their own method—is flawed.

#### *Justice, Claims and Prioritarianism: Room for Desert?*

Matthew Adler motivates the question of whether desert belongs in theories of justice and admits that he is more skeptical of desert modulating accounts of distributive justice after writing this paper. His skepticism primarily stems from his finding that desert modulating claims conflict with the Pareto principle. Adler describes justice as a quasi-ordering of potential outcomes, in which the currency that ought to drive the rank-ordering is contentious. Currency contenders include welfare, Dworkin’s notion of resource advantage, Sen’s notion of capabilities, Rawls’s notion of Primary Goods, among others. Regardless of one’s favored currency, Adler argues, the generic Pareto principle should be compelling.

In Adler's framework, individuals have claims over outcomes when the claim increases the currency (assumed in the paper to be well-being). Just outcomes must also satisfy four axioms, including the strong Pareto principle and Pareto indifference. To make room for desert in this framework, imagine that individuals have some heterogeneous, exogenous desert attribute and that a claim's weight is increasing in the individual's level of desert. Although there is intuitive force to allocating more to the more deserving individual all else being equal, introducing priority for the most deserving individuals violates Pareto indifference. Moreover, if one adds a continuity axiom, desert-modulated claims also conflict with the strong Pareto principle.

## Discussion

Jerry Green introduces the ingredients necessary to include desert in an economic framework for maximizing welfare. Consider a population of  $n$  individuals as a collection  $(x, z, d)$ , where individual welfare ( $x$ ) is cardinal and subjective, and relative position in the population ( $z$ ) is ordinal and judged externally. Desert ( $d$ ) can be used to adjust  $x$ , yielding the collection  $(Y, z)$ . Green suggests using a class of functional forms that captures the idea of Prioritarianism, inspired by an analogy between welfare and the theory of choice under uncertainty. The expected utility hypothesis rests on the independence axiom—that adding another variable shouldn't change the choice. Prioritarianism rests on ordinal independence. According to Prioritarianism, we should be integrating over a function that depends on  $z$  explicitly. Specifically, the cross derivative between  $z$  and  $F(z)$  should be negative.