

Priority for Comparative, Not Absolute Benefits

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Abstract: Prioritarianism is claimed to fare badly in variable-population comparisons. This is so, I argue, because it is understood as Absolute Prioritarianism, as invoking an increasing, strictly concave function of absolute welfare. That misunderstands Parfit's Priority View by considering the absolute welfare rather than the welfare gains and losses. Therefore, it implies a super-repugnant conclusion and the desirability of welfare diffusion by creating people. However, both implications are implausible – at least if we reject that people can be better off by coming into existence. I present an alternative – Comparative Prioritarianism – which is concerned only with individual gains and losses. I argue that this avoids the implausible implications, it can be supplemented with further principles that solve the problems of population ethics, and it prevents cyclical orderings if we adopt a set-wise approach to comparing outcomes. Therefore, Comparative Prioritarianism is better suited to capture the core intuition of the Priority View.

Many people believe that the correct moral theory must be sensitive to the distribution of welfare. One prominent position is what Derek Parfit has called the

Priority View: Benefiting individuals matters more the worse off these individuals are.¹

Although in principle combinable with different welfare functions, the Priority View is mostly construed with a total sum function of weighted individual benefits.

Prioritarianism: An outcome is better the larger the sum of weighted benefits individuals receive in that outcome, where benefits are weighted such that they gain a greater value, the worse off the individual to whom they accrue.²

Prioritarianism transfers the personal value of individual benefits into moral value, thereby giving benefits more weight the worse off an individual is, and sums up the resulting moral values to compare distributions of welfare (or outcomes, for short).³ It is common to presuppose a “whole life” interpretation of Prioritarianism, according to which an individual

¹ Cf. Parfit 1991: 19 and the reprint 1997: 113.

² For similar formulations see, for example, Holtug 2007: 4, Adler 2008: 1478, Parfit 2012: 402. I consider Prioritarianism here as an axiological view; for a deontic understanding, see, for example, Nebel 2017.

³ By *personal* value, I mean value *for* the individual, by *moral* value, the value that represents *moral significance* and, thus, enters the calculation of the overall value of outcomes to compare the outcomes morally. Others call this “general” value or good, for example, Broome 1991: 8 and 179.

is worse off if and only if their welfare level is lower over the course of their whole life rather than at a particular point in time.⁴

Prioritarianism is often considered a theory for comparing *fixed* populations.⁵ A restriction to fixed populations, however, is unsatisfying. As Parfit has famously argued, many, if not most, of our choices will affect the identity and number of future people, in particular important choices on large-scale policy decisions.⁶ Prioritarianism restricted to fixed populations has thus very limited applicability. For a comprehensive version of Prioritarianism, we thus need to be able to apply it to variable populations as well. This is the matter this paper discusses.

Recently, Prioritarianism has been defined in more detail via a set of axioms that a theory of outcome comparisons must satisfy. The striking feature that distinguishes Prioritarianism from, for example, utilitarianism is

Pigou-Dalton: A pure, non-rank-switching transfer of well-being from someone better off to someone worse off, leaving everyone else unaffected, is a moral improvement.⁷

Simply put, taking x units of welfare from a better-off individual and giving it to a worse-off individual, everything else being equal, makes things better. That seems to fit the core idea and is thus widely accepted.⁸ For variable-population choices, however, Pigou-Dalton is only of limited help because it does not tell us how the benefits to additional people count morally.⁹ I will thus stick with the looser definition of Prioritarianism given above.

⁴ See, for example, Brown 2007: 329, Holtug 2007: 5 and 2010: 205–207, Adler/Holtug 2019: 103, Francis 2024: 55. For defence, see Adler 2012: ch. 6. Holtug 2010: ch. 10 holds a more complex view. Andrić and Herlitz 2022 argue that so called time-sliced version of Prioritarianism have implausible implications.

⁵ Explicitly so in Broome 1991: 166–167 and 179, and 2015: 219–221, Parfit 2012: 440. Even Alder and Holtug, generally concerned with variable populations, often restrict the scope of their discussion to fixed populations, for example, in their 2019 and 2025.

⁶ Cf. Parfit 1984: ch. 15.

⁷ Cf. Adler 2012: 308–309, 2022: 63–64, Adler/Holtug 2019: 103.

⁸ One exception is McCarthy 2013 and 2017. See Adler/Holtug 2019: 111–112 for a defence against McCarthy.

⁹ I'm assuming here that non-existence cannot be better or worse for an individual than existence – an assumption I briefly defend in section 2.2.

So, what if we apply Prioritarianism to comparisons of variable populations? Unrestricted Prioritarianism seems to have problematic implications, as even some of its proponents have argued.¹⁰ To avoid those implications, some people propose variations of Prioritarianism that, for example, consider welfare to be only positive or apply not only one but different weighting functions.¹¹ Others bite the bullet and justify the implications by claiming that individuals can benefit from coming into existence.¹² But this is highly controversial. What if we reject it? In this paper, I trace back the problems of Prioritarianism in variable-population comparisons to the common construal of Prioritarianism as invoking an increasing, strictly concave function of *absolute* welfare: Absolute Prioritarianism. We should reject it because it misunderstands the Priority View by considering the individuals' *absolute* welfare rather than their gains and losses as relevant.¹³ I present an alternative construal – Comparative Prioritarianism – that is concerned with individual *gains* and *losses* and weights them more the worse off the individuals are. This narrow person-affecting version of Prioritarianism avoids the problematic implications in variable-population comparisons. It is not plausible as a monistic principle, but we can accept it as a pro tanto principle for the comparison of outcomes. Note that, onwards, Prioritarianism and all its considered versions will be understood as unrestricted – that is, as applying to variable-population comparisons as well – except if noted otherwise.

I start by presenting Absolute Prioritarianism and show that it fares badly in variable-population comparisons. In section 2, I analyse what went wrong in the debate that applies Prioritarianism to variable-population comparisons and trace the problems back to the fact that Absolute Prioritarianism interprets “benefits” as absolute welfare rather than as comparative gains and losses. In section 3, I present Comparative Prioritarianism, show that it avoids the flaws of Absolute Prioritarianism, and distinguish it from another seemingly similar

¹⁰ Cf. Brown 2007, Holtug 2007 and 2010: ch. 9, Adler 2008: 1500–1511. See also Otsuka 2022: 530–536 for similar criticism.

¹¹ See Brown 2007: secs. 4–6.

¹² Cf. Holtug 1999: 22–25, 2001, 2010: ch. 5, Adler 2008: 1505–1506.

¹³ Henceforth, any mentioning of “benefits” or “gains” is meant to include negative benefits or losses.

proposal. In section 4, I answer objections concerning variable populations and refine Comparative Prioritarianism.

1 Absolute Prioritarianism and its Problems

Prioritarianism is commonly understood as a moral principle that sums up the weighted *absolute* welfare of the individuals for each outcome and compares the outcomes based on these sums, where the weights are higher the lower the individual's welfare level. More formally, let A and B be outcomes, s an individual, and u_{Os} the individual's absolute welfare level in an outcome O , and S_O the set of individuals existing in O . Prioritarianism is then typically understood as

Absolute Prioritarianism

In comparing two outcomes A and B , A is morally at least as good as B iff

$\sum_{s \in S_A} g(u_{As}) \geq \sum_{s \in S_B} g(u_{Bs})$, where g is an increasing, strictly concave function.¹⁴

Absolute Prioritarianism is simple and seems to capture the idea of the Priority View combined with a total sum function.

However, Absolute Prioritarianism has implausible implications in variable-population comparisons. As principles that sum up the *unweighted* absolute welfare, Absolute Prioritarianism implies the

Repugnant Conclusion

Compared with a population of very many individuals with very high levels of welfare, there is some much larger population which is better although all the individuals in the larger population have lives that are barely worth living.¹⁵

¹⁴ See Holtug 1999, 2007: 4, and 2010: 206, Brown 2007: 328–330, Adler 2008, 2022: 42–44, Adler/Holtug 2025. I am only referencing those authors here that apply Absolute Prioritarianism to variable-population comparisons. My objections in this section don't apply to those that accept Absolute Prioritarianism only with a restriction to fixed populations. The problem with such accounts is that their applicability is severely restricted as argued in the introduction.

¹⁵ See Parfit 1984: 388 for the original and Holtug 2010: 254 for the implication regarding Prioritarianism.

This is so because the sum of the moral value of arbitrarily high individual welfare in one outcome can be outweighed by the sum of the moral value of arbitrarily low positive individual welfare in another outcome if sufficiently many individuals exist in the latter outcome. Some philosophers accept the Repugnant Conclusion and try to debunk the intuition of repugnancy.¹⁶ However, Absolute Prioritarianism implies an even stronger version – the

Super-Repugnant Conclusion

Compared with a population of very many individuals with very high levels of welfare, there is some much larger population which is better although all the individuals in the larger population have lives that are barely worth living and *the total sum of welfare in the larger population is lower*.¹⁷

Compare, for example, the two outcomes

A: Ten billion individuals exist at welfare level 100.

Z: One trillion minus one individual exist at welfare level 1.

According to a simple total sum function, A is better than Z because the total sum of welfare in A is slightly higher than in Z, namely higher by one unit of welfare. According to Absolute Prioritarianism, however, the welfare units of the individuals in Z receives, on average, a higher weight than welfare units of the individuals in A and, thus, count more. Therefore, on any plausible weighting function g , Z is better than A according to Absolute Prioritarianism.¹⁸ Hence, Absolute Prioritarianism implies not only the Repugnant Conclusion but also the Super-Repugnant Conclusion. This is absurd. The best argument for accepting the Repugnant Conclusion is that the large population with low welfare has a higher sum of

¹⁶ For example, Tännsjö 2002, Huemer 2008. See also Zuber at al. 2021.

¹⁷ Cf. Holtug 2007: 8.

¹⁸ Namely, for any function g that implies the weight of welfare level 1 to be 10^{-12} greater than the weight of welfare level 100. One may reject my intuitive notion of “plausible” here. But the point can be generalised:

A: n individuals exist with a high welfare level h .

Z: m individuals exist with a low welfare level l

On any function g that is increasing and strictly concave, and for any $n \in \mathbb{N}$, and any arbitrarily high $h \in \mathbb{R}$, there is some $m \in \mathbb{N}$ and some $l \in \mathbb{R}$ such that the total welfare in Z is lower than in A – $n \times h > m \times l$ – and the moral value in Z is higher than in A – $\sum m \times g(l) > \sum n \times g(h)$.

welfare than the smaller population with high welfare levels. Nothing alike holds for the Super-Repugnant Conclusion, though. Z is worse than A in every respect.¹⁹

The problem of Absolute Prioritarianism is more general. It implies what Ingmar Persson calls

“the desirability of welfare diffusion: it is better all things considered if a quantity of welfare is diffused as much as possible, i.e. distributed over as many recipients as possible, so that each recipient gets a minimal benefit” (Persson 2011: 309).

For illustration, consider the

Absolute Welfare Diffusion Case

You can confer n units of welfare either (a) by creating n individuals with welfare level 1 or (b) by creating one individual with welfare level n .

According to Absolute Prioritarianism, (a) is better than (b) for any $n > 1$ because low levels of welfare receive a greater weight than higher levels of welfare. It is thus better to diffuse a given amount of welfare among as many individuals as possible than to confer the same amount to only one individual.²⁰

You might try to defend welfare diffusion by claiming it to be a desired implication of Absolute Prioritarianism that expresses the tendency to more equal distributions. That might indeed be plausible when we make people better off than they would otherwise have been. However, it is absurd to do so by bringing additional people into existence. Consider a case

¹⁹ The problem could be mitigated by assigning negative moral value to low positive welfare levels. However, this implausibly implies that adding an individual with low positive welfare makes an outcome worse and the Strong Sadistic Conclusion; cf. Arrhenius 2000: 256. Therefore, I’m presupposing that the moral value of positive welfare is positive. Holtug argues (2010: 255–256) that Absolute Prioritarianism mitigates a negative version of the Repugnant Conclusion and accounts for a weak asymmetry according to which it is better to prevent an individual’s existence with a welfare level $-u$ rather than to create an individual with a welfare level u . However, if we accept the Repugnant Conclusion, it is unclear what would be wrong with that negative version. Furthermore, even Holtug (2010: 286) doubts that the advantage, if it is one at all, can make up for the implausibility of the Super-Repugnant Conclusion.

²⁰ Tomi Francis (2024) shows that, understood as a direct objection, it assumes that the moral values are aggregated by summation and individuals can benefit by coming into existence. He strengthens the case against Prioritarianism by showing that, even without those assumptions, it implies welfare diffusion to be desirable if we accept mere addition and separability. Since Absolute Prioritarianism aggregates by summation and implies that individuals benefit from coming into existence in an absolute sense, it is subject even to the direct objection, though.

where we can confer n units of welfare by raising the welfare level of people rather than by creating them.

Comparative Welfare Diffusion Case

You can confer n units of welfare either (a) by making n existing individuals better off by 1 unit of welfare or (b) by making one existing individual better off by n units of welfare, where all individuals are equally well off.

Benefiting n individuals rather than the one takes priority because benefits receive a greater weight the worse off the individuals are. Thus, after we have given one unit of welfare to an individual, we should give every other unit to another individual because they are now worse off than the individual we already gave one unit. This fits with the core intuition of Prioritarianism: If we can benefit either worse-off individuals or better-off individuals by the same amount, the former takes priority. In the Absolute Welfare Diffusion Case, however, things are different. While benefiting the worse off in normal circumstances takes priority, it is absurd to prioritise bringing individuals into existence with low levels of welfare over individuals with high levels of welfare, where the amount of welfare created is equal. We want to prioritise *improving* the lives of the worse off. We do not want to prioritise there *being* lives that are worse off. That, however, is what Absolute Prioritarianism does if the lives are worth living.

2 From the Priority View to Absolute Prioritarianism: What Went Wrong

Absolute Prioritarianism fares badly in variable-population comparisons. It implies the Super-Repugnant Conclusion and makes it desirable to diffuse a given amount of welfare by creating as many new people as possible. In this section, I analyse what went wrong in the debate.

2.1 Lifting the Restriction to Fixed Populations

Parfit presented the Priority View as the claim to give priority to the benefits of the worse-off individuals. It was then argued that Prioritarianism is representable as an increasing and strictly concave function of the *absolute* welfare of the individuals – that is, of the extent to which an outcome is *good* or *bad* for an individual. John Broome showed that Prioritarianism can be represented by a function for the moral value V_O of an outcome O of the form

$V_O = g(u_{O_1}) + g(u_{O_2}) + \dots + g(u_{O_n})$, where g is an increasing, strictly concave function of individual welfare u_{O_j} .²¹

However, Broome's discussion is restricted to fixed-population comparisons, that is, to comparisons of outcomes in which the same and only the same individuals exist.²² Later, Parfit also clarified that the Priority View is meant to be so restricted:

“the Prioritarian Principles that I have considered cannot be applied to cases in which, in the different possible outcomes, different people would exist. When we consider these cases, we need other principles.” (Parfit 2012: 440.)

With the restriction fixed-population comparisons, however, Prioritarianism does not apply to the wide range of cases that involve different individuals or different numbers of individuals; restricted Prioritarianism has nothing to say about variable-population comparisons.

Nils Holtug has lifted the restriction to fixed-population comparisons to establish Prioritarianism as a monistic view of how to compare outcomes in general. Others did as well, for example, Matthew Adler.²³ Nevertheless, they adopt Broome's representation of Prioritarianism by presenting function g as an increasing, strictly concave function of absolute welfare.²⁴ Holtug, for example, says:

“Assuming a ‘whole lives’ version of prioritarianism, we can take the total life-time welfare that will accrue to an individual if she comes into existence, divide it into welfare units and gradually assign less weight to these units. So the first unit has the highest moral value, the second a lower such value and so on.” (Holtug 2007: 5-6.)

An individual's weighted absolute welfare enters the calculation, with the weight being larger the lower the welfare level. This is Absolute Prioritarianism.

²¹ Cf. Broome 1991: 179, 2015: 221.

²² Cf. Broome 1991: 166–167 and 179, 2015: 219–221.

²³ First in Holtug 1999. See also Brown 2007 and Adler 2008, 2012.

²⁴ Cf. Holtug 1999, 2007: 4, and 2010: 206, Brown 2007: 328–330, Adler 2008: 1478, 2012: ch. 5, 2022: 52–53. Adler/Holtug 2025.

However, as we have seen, Absolute Prioritarianism turns the prioritarian idea upside down in variable-population comparisons: in distributing a fixed amount of welfare, we should not only prioritise giving it to individuals who are worse off than others, but also prioritise creating individuals who are less well off than others that we could create (if they still have positive welfare). Neither Broome nor Parfit says why they restrict the scope of Prioritarianism – or rather the representation of Prioritarianism as Absolute Prioritarianism – to fixed-population comparisons. Yet, the reason is obvious: it fares badly in variable-population comparisons.

2.2 *Existence-Comparativism*

Some proponents of Absolute Prioritarianism will counter. They will argue that Absolute Prioritarianism and the claim that we should prioritise creating additional individuals who are worse off than others is a consistent extension of Prioritarianism, given the following assumption.

Existence-Comparativism

Existence can be better or worse for an individual than her non-existence.²⁵

Existence-Comparativism implies that individuals can be comparatively benefited by being brought into existence. If they have good lives, they are made better off than they would have been. Consequently, insofar as an individual is worse off than others, we should prioritise her being benefited even by bringing her into existence. Holtug, for example, explicitly claims so.²⁶

However, Existence-Comparativism might very well be false. While I cannot thoroughly argue against it here, I will briefly justify why I deny Existence-Comparativism for the remainder of this paper by pointing out its problems. First, Existence-Comparativists must either claim that the relation “ x is better for an individual than y ” can hold when the individual does not exist. This, however, implies that non-existent individuals can have properties – the property of something being better for them – and thus presupposes a possibilist position,

²⁵ Cf. Holtug 1999: 22–25, 2001, 2010: ch. 5. See also Adler 2008: 1505–1506.

²⁶ Cf. Holtug 2010: 252–3.

which is controversial.²⁷ Or they must restrict the validity of the assessment to the state in which the existence of the individual obtains. Then, however, the truth of the assessment depends on whether the individual is actually brought into existence – a decision with which Prioritarianism is supposed to help us. It thus seems problematic if the assessment is variant on our actions.²⁸

Furthermore, if existence can be better for an individual than non-existence, non-existence must be good, bad, or neutral for the individual. Existence-Comparativists must explain that: Why can non-existence have at least neutral value for an individual?²⁹ Some claim that non-existence has neutral value for the existing version of the individual. This, however, means to assign neutral value in a cross-world manner: the world in which the individual does not exist would be neutral for the individual in the world in which it exists. It greatly stretches the idea of value for someone. Others claim that something is neutral for an individual if it is not the case that it is good or bad for the individual. Since non-existence is neither good nor bad for an individual, it would be neutral for the individual. However, the condition is fulfilled even for individuals who do not exist in any possible world. Hence, all worlds would be equally good for individuals who cannot exist – an implausible claim.

Third, the state of affairs *non-existence* cannot have any value-making features for an individual. Thus, proponents of Existence-Comparativism are committed to the view that a state of affairs can be better for an individual even though it is neither metaphysically nor conceptually possible that the state of affairs has any value-making features for the individual. If this is so, however, it seems that just any state of affairs can be better or worse for just anything: nights can be better for rocks than days, floods can be better for numbers than droughts, and weekends can be better for propositions than working days. These assessments do not make any sense – at least not insofar as someone (or something) would be benefited by being better off.³⁰

²⁷ Cf. Broome 1993: 77 and 1999: 168, Bykvist 2007: 343. Even Holtug (2010: 138) accepts actualism rather than possibilism. For the contrary position see Greaves/Cusbert 2022.

²⁸ Cf. Bykvist 2007: 350–353. Holtug 1999: 22–25, 2001, 2010: ch. 5 and Arrhenius/Rabinowicz 2015 take that route.

²⁹ Cf. Bykvist 2015: 90.

³⁰ For similar arguments, see Bykvist 2015 and Herstein 2013.

The reasons just given do not refute Existence-Comparativism entirely. Yet, they greatly raise the costs for its proponents, and they show that Existence-Comparativism is a highly controversial claim with questionable presuppositions and implausible implications.³¹ Thus, we have good reason to reject the claim that individuals are comparatively benefited by being brought into existence – at least as a crucial assumption on which the plausibility of our preferred construal of Prioritarianism depends. Consequently, we can plausibly consider the implications of Absolute Prioritarianism as incoherent with the Priority View. Absolute Prioritarianism indeed fares badly in variable-population comparisons.

2.3 *Comparative and Absolute Benefits*

According to Prioritarianism, an outcome is better the larger the sum of weighted benefits individuals receive in that outcome, and benefits are weighted such that they gain a greater value the worse off the individual to whom they accrue. This, however, is under-determined. It leaves open how to understand “benefits”.

There are two senses in which individuals can be benefited. On the one hand, if an individual gains welfare relative to the compared outcomes, the individual is benefited *comparatively*. On the other hand, if an individual is merely caused to exist with a certain level of welfare, the individual does not gain any welfare. It just has a certain level of welfare if it exists, or it does not have any welfare if it does not exist. Thus, assuming that Existence-Comparativism is false, the benefits bestowed on the individual are *absolute* rather than comparative.³²

Prioritarianism transforms the personal value of the benefits into moral value by giving greater weight to benefits the worse off the individuals are. The interpretation of benefits as either absolute or comparative thus determines the arguments of the weighting function g ,

³¹ It is denied by McMahan 1981, Parfit 1984: appendix G, Broome 1993: 77, 1999: 168, Bykvist 2007, 2015, Herstein 2013, Bader 2022: 263. Furthermore, Absolute Prioritarianism has been claimed to be independent from the truth of Existence-Comparativism. As Holtug clarifies: his “claims do not presuppose that a person can benefit from coming into existence. I do in fact believe that a person can so benefit [...], but this is not essential here.” (Holtug 2007: 6, fn. 6.)

³² Cf. McMahan 1981: 105 and 2013: 6–7, Parfit 1984: 187–190, Bykvist 2007 for the distinction between absolute and comparative benefits.

which determines the moral value of individual benefits. Depending on what enters g as arguments, benefits are conceived as absolute or comparative.

Regarding Prioritarianism, the distinction has not received much attention.³³ This is surprising because the two interpretations of benefits yield very different versions of Prioritarianism. If Existence-Comparativism is false, a comparative understanding considers the welfare of only those individuals who exist in both compared outcomes as morally relevant because nothing can be better or worse for individuals who do not exist in at least two compared alternatives. Thus, they cannot have any comparative benefits.³⁴ An absolute understanding of benefits, by contrast, concerns the welfare of all individuals. For, although individuals who exist in only one of two compared outcomes cannot benefit comparatively, they still can benefit absolutely. The outcome can still be good or bad for them.

Prioritarianism should be understood as the idea that *comparative* benefits and *only* comparative benefits receive more weight, the worse off an individual is. This is how Parfit introduced the Priority View. It is how Broome understood it by restricting the scope to fixed-population comparisons. And it is what “benefits” intuitively refers to and how most philosophers interpret the term: they talk about the *gains* for individuals, or their *increase* of welfare, or their being *better* off.³⁵ Any of these notions appeals to comparative rather than to absolute benefits.

Absolute Prioritarianism, however, interprets benefits as *absolute*; it weights the individuals’ absolute welfare by giving priority to the worse off and sums up the so-weighted absolute welfare. As we have seen, however, this is implausible – at least if Existence-Comparativism is false. Absolute Prioritarianism is concerned with more than comparative benefits. That is why it turns the intuitive idea of Prioritarianism upside down. It implies that it matters more, relatively speaking, to cause individuals to exist at lower welfare levels rather than to cause other individuals to exist at higher welfare levels. Therefore, Absolute Prioritarianism implies the Super-Repugnant Conclusion and the desirability of welfare

³³ For a recent exception see Otsuka 2022.

³⁴ This is probably the reason why Parfit, Broome and others restricted Prioritarianism to fixed-population comparisons. As we will see in section 4.1, the version that I am proposing here can capture the idea without relying on the restriction.

³⁵ For example, Parfit 1997: 219–221, Temkin 1993: 245 and 2000: 128, Holtug 2010: 202–204.

diffusion. Consequently, Absolute Prioritarianism fares badly in variable-population comparisons because it mistakenly interprets benefits as absolute rather than as comparative.

3 Comparative Prioritarianism

Absolute Prioritarianism fares badly in variable-population comparisons. Arguably, this is why Parfit and Broome have restricted the scope of the Priority View and Prioritarianism to fixed-population comparisons. So, should we reinstate that restriction? No, we can do better! We should understand Prioritarianism as the view that only *comparative* benefits receive more weight the lower the individual's welfare level.³⁶ Hence, for an individual's equal welfare level and rising comparative benefit, the moral value of the benefits must increase; for equal comparative benefits and a rising welfare level, the moral value must decrease. Two outcomes are then compared based on the sum of the moral values.

More formally and as before, let A and B be outcomes, s an individual, and u_{O_s} the individual's welfare level in an outcome O , and S_O the set of individuals existing in O . Furthermore, I assume that the welfare level that determines the weight is the arithmetic mean of an individual's welfare levels in the compared alternatives: $\frac{1}{2}(u_{A_s} + u_{B_s})$. This yields

Comparative Prioritarianism

In comparing two outcomes A and B , A is (in one respect) morally at least as good as B iff $\sum_{s \in S_A \cap S_B} g(\frac{u_{A_s} + u_{B_s}}{2}, u_{A_s} - u_{B_s}) \geq \sum_{s \in S_B \cap S_A} g(\frac{u_{B_s} + u_{A_s}}{2}, u_{B_s} - u_{A_s})$, where g is a multiplying function that is strictly decreasing in the first argument and strictly increasing in the second argument.

Comparative Prioritarianism sums up the moral values of the individuals' welfare gains and losses, where gains and losses receive more weight the worse off the individual, that is, the lower the individual's level of absolute welfare. It specifies only one respect in which we compare outcomes morally. Before I come back to that in the next section, I will explain the details of the view, how it avoids the flaws of Absolute Prioritarianism, and in which way it differs from another, seemingly similar proposal.

³⁶ Francis 2024: sec. 6 mentions the possibility to avoid welfare diffusion.

First, the weight that an individual's welfare gains and losses receive depends on the arithmetic mean of the individuals' welfare levels in the compared outcomes. The lower it is, the more a gain or loss matters. This ensures that a gain of x units of welfare to y individuals matters more than a gain of $x \times y$ units of welfare to just one individual. If the relevant welfare level were the welfare level in one of the compared outcomes, it would be the other way around.

Second, the individuals' comparative, not their absolute, benefits are relevant. If Existence-Comparativism is false, individuals who exist in only one of two compared outcomes cannot gain or lose any welfare and, thus, cannot benefit comparatively. Consequently, Comparative Prioritarianism takes into account only the welfare (gains and losses) of individuals who exist in both compared outcomes – only of the individuals $s \in S_A \cap S_B$ – and sums up their weighted moral values.

It might be helpful to give an example for function g . Disregarding, for simplicity, negative welfare levels, it could be $g = \frac{(u_{A_s} - u_{B_s})}{\frac{1}{2}(u_{A_s} + u_{B_s})}$. For a fixed gain of 10 units of welfare and varying arithmetic means of the absolute levels, Figure 1 shows what the corresponding graph would look like; the x-axis depicts the arithmetic mean of the welfare level – $\frac{1}{2}(u_{A_s} + u_{B_s})$ – and the y-axis shows the resulting moral value – V . As the graph shows, the function is strictly decreasing in the first argument: the higher the arithmetic mean of the welfare level, the lower the moral value of the gain of 10 units of welfare. At an arithmetic mean of 10, for example, a gain of 10 units has the moral value 10, whereas the gain has a moral value of less than 4 at an arithmetic mean of 30. In line with the Priority View, thus, gains receive more weight the worse off, and less weight the better off, an individual – that is, the lower or higher, respectively, the individual's welfare level.



Figure 1: Example of function g with fixed welfare gain $(u_{A_s} - u_{B_s}) = 10$

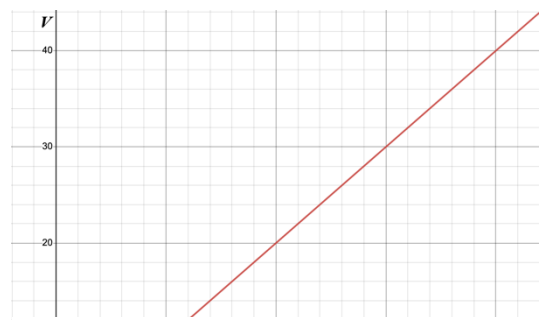


Figure 2: Example of function g with a fixed arithmetic mean of the welfare levels $\frac{1}{2}(u_{A_s} + u_{B_s}) = 1$

Figure 2 shows the graph for a fixed arithmetic mean of the welfare level of 1 and varying welfare gains, where the y -axis again shows the resulting moral value V , but the x -axis now depicts the size of the gain $u_{A_s} - u_{B_s}$. The graph is a straight upward line; thus, the function is strictly increasing in the second argument, and here even linearly so. The increase from 10 to 30 units in the gain, for example, corresponds to an increase in the moral value from 10 to 30. This shows that the higher a welfare gain, the higher the moral value of that gain is.

Comparative Prioritarianism differs from Absolute Prioritarianism and overcomes its flaws: given that Existence-Comparativism is false, it avoids the Super-Repugnant Conclusion and the desirability of welfare diffusion by creating people. Consider the Super-Repugnant Conclusion first. The additional individuals that exist in Z but not in A do not enter the calculation of the moral value of Z , because they do not gain any welfare. Thus, it is not the case that Z is better than A . Furthermore, since the welfare of the additional individuals in Z does not count, according to Comparative Prioritarianism, it does not receive any additional weight either. Therefore, Comparative Prioritarianism avoids the Super-Repugnant Conclusion.

I distinguished two versions of welfare diffusion in section 1. Let us start with the implausible version: welfare diffusion by creating people. According to Absolute Prioritarianism, it is better to distribute a fixed amount of welfare by bringing as many individuals into existence as possible with low positive welfare rather than fewer individuals with higher levels of welfare. Comparative Prioritarianism avoids that. Individuals who come into existence do not exist in the alternative. Therefore, they do not gain or lose any welfare if Existence-Comparativism is false. Consequently, their welfare has no moral value, and thus it is not better to create, for example, n individuals with welfare level 1 than to create one individual with welfare level n . Consequently, Comparative Prioritarianism does not imply that welfare diffusion by creating people is desirable.

Nevertheless, Comparative Prioritarianism implies the plausible version of welfare diffusion and thus captures the core intuition of the Priority View: it prioritises giving welfare to individuals who are worse off. Comparative benefits to individuals with lower welfare levels receive a greater weight and, thus, higher moral value than comparative benefits of the same size to individuals with higher welfare levels. Therefore, if we can distribute a given amount of

welfare to different individuals by making them better off, Comparative Prioritarianism implies that it is better to benefit the worse-off individuals.

Comparative Prioritarianism also satisfies Pigou-Dalton, which I introduced in the introduction as one axiom the satisfaction of which is often claimed to be essential for Prioritarianism. Let x be the amount of welfare that we can transfer from a better-off individual p at welfare level l_p to a worse-off individual q at welfare level l_q , where the transfer is non-rank-switching, and everyone else is unaffected by the transfer; hence, $l_p - x > l_q + x$. According to Comparative Prioritarianism, the transfer is better if and only if $g\left(\frac{l_q + (l_q + x)}{2}, x\right) > g\left(\frac{l_p + (l_p - x)}{2}, x\right)$. Given $l_q + x < l_p - x$, the numerator of the first argument is smaller on the left-hand side of the inequality than it is on the right-hand side. Since function g is strictly decreasing in the first argument, the left-hand side of the inequality is larger than the right-hand side. Thus, the transfer is indeed better, and Comparative Prioritarianism satisfies Pigou-Dalton. Consequently, Comparative Prioritarianism captures the basic intuition underlying Prioritarianism but avoids the flaws of Absolute Prioritarianism.

Before I continue discussing the problems of Comparative Prioritarianism with variable populations, it will be convenient to highlight the novelty of my approach in light of other proposals that are comparative in character, in particular Martin Peterson's two-dimensional Prioritarianism.³⁷ Just as his account, Comparative Prioritarianism defines moral value as "a two-part function that takes as its arguments both the state of affairs and the change brought about by the act" (Peterson 2010: 439). It might thus be thought that Comparative Prioritarianism has nothing new to offer.

However, there are crucial differences. First, Peterson restricts his account to fixed-population comparisons.³⁸ As argued before, any theory that does so will be severely restricted in its applicability. If we applied it to variable-population comparisons as well, Peterson's theory would run into the same problems as Absolute Prioritarianism, as the second difference will highlight.

³⁷ Cf. Peterson 2010 and 2013: ch. 3.

³⁸ Cf. Peterson 2010: 439.

So second, Peterson's account holds that the moral value of an individual's welfare is the sum of two separate things: the weighted absolute welfare and the weighted welfare difference.³⁹ Comparative Prioritarianism, by contrast, uses only one function, a multiplying function, that has as its arguments both the absolute welfare and the welfare difference. That is why Comparative Prioritarianism avoids implausible implications in variable-population choices. If an individual exists in only one outcome, there is no welfare difference, and thus, in the respect that Comparative Prioritarianism determines, the individual's welfare has no moral value. Peterson's two-dimensional Prioritarianism, however, if it were applied to variable populations, would imply the Super-Repugnant Conclusion and the desirability of welfare diffusion by creating people. This is because the individual's absolute welfare would still provide moral value even though the individual does not gain or lose anything. For individuals who come into existence, two-dimensional Prioritarianism would collapse into Absolute Prioritarianism.

Third, Peterson considers welfare differences by comparing the consequences of an action with the status quo – that is, with the outcome obtaining prior to the action. He does so to capture the intuition that a loss of welfare would be worse than an equal gain of welfare. Welfare transfers come with moral costs, he says.⁴⁰ However, the special importance of the status quo strikes me as unwarranted. Peterson's account implies that a transfer of a fixed amount of welfare from better-off people to worse-off people can be a change for the worse. That contradicts the prioritarian idea, and it violates Pigou-Dalton.⁴¹ Certainly, changes can come with costs to individuals: frustration of expectations, difficulties to arrange with a changed situation etc. Such costs, however, would be moral costs supervening on additional welfare losses of individuals. In Peterson's case, even without such losses, the transfer comes with moral costs.

Compare two choices in both of which a fixed amount of welfare is transferred from a better-off person to a worse-off person. The difference is that, in the first situation, the change is due to purely natural processes, but we can prevent the natural change from happening. In

³⁹ Cf. Peterson 2010: 440.

⁴⁰ Cf. Peterson 2010: 440–442

⁴¹ As Peterson (2013: 72) acknowledges.

the second situation, we can bring about the change. How two-dimensional Prioritarianism assesses the two choices depends on the understanding of the status quo. On the one hand, if the status quo is the outcome, stretched infinitely in time, that results from our inaction, the two choices could be assessed significantly differently. It could then be that we should refrain from bringing about the transfer in the second choice but allow the natural change to happen in the first. That strikes me as highly unwarranted since the consequences would have been identical. On the other hand, if the status quo is the state of affairs *temporally* prior to an action or event, we should bring about the same consequences in both choices. For example, if the change in the second choice is morally bad, the natural change would be morally bad as well. However, that amounts to a strong bias for the present situation that seems unwarranted itself. We could then have moral reasons to prevent welfare transfers from better-off to worse-off people, even if they happen naturally.

Comparative Prioritarianism does not give any special importance to the status quo. Welfare differences are considered counterfactual: we compare the consequences of an action with what would have been had we acted differently (which can include not acting at all). Note, however, that if a change comes with actual costs for the individuals – that is, if the individuals would lose additional welfare – a transfer of welfare from better-off to worse-off people could, of course, be morally bad. As long as the consequences on the individuals' welfare are identical, however, two situations will be assessed in the same way.

Finally, Peterson's account is motivated by the idea that killing and replacing an individual with another equally happy individual is not morally neutral – a verdict that standard forms of Prioritarianism fail to deliver.⁴² I agree with that point. However, note first that given Peterson's restriction to fixed populations, he cannot consider this an advantage. Replacing an individual changes the population. Thus, his theory does not say anything about replacements. Comparative Prioritarianism, by contrast, can capture the point: the killing of a happy individual amounts to a welfare loss, while the creation of a new equally happy individual is not a (comparative) benefit. Thus, Comparative Prioritarianism implies that killing and replacing an individual is, at least in one respect, morally bad. Consequently,

⁴² Cf. Peterson 2010: 435.

Comparative Prioritarianism is not just substantially different from the two-dimensional view; it is also superior.

4 Comparative Prioritarianism and Variable Populations

Comparative Prioritarianism is not without problems, though. One might claim that it would not achieve more than a restricted version of Absolute Prioritarianism, that it would be silent on variable-population comparisons and, thus, fail, and that it would imply cyclical assessment and should, therefore, be rejected. I counter the three objections in that order.

4.1 Restrictions and Ad-hoc-ness

Comparative Prioritarianism avoids the flaws of Absolute Prioritarianism because it implies that only the welfare counts of those individuals who exist in both compared outcomes. Therefore, instead of switching to Comparative Prioritarianism, one could simply restrict the scope of Absolute Prioritarianism either by limiting it to fixed-population comparisons, as Parfit and Broome have done, or by advocating some modal difference between individuals, in particular by counting only the welfare of independently existing individuals. Such restrictions would do the same job.⁴³

However, restricting the scope of Prioritarianism is ad hoc and limiting. On the first restriction, the only reason for doing so is to avoid the Super-Repugnant Conclusion and the desirability of welfare diffusion by creating people. Furthermore, it renders the range of cases in which Absolute Prioritarianism is applicable rather small, as I pointed out in the introduction already. If only one individual did not exist in all compared outcomes, Absolute Prioritarianism would not be applicable anymore. On the second restriction, why would the moral value of the absolute welfare of dependently existing individuals *per se* be irrelevant to the comparison of outcomes? Since individuals who dependently exist *have* welfare in the outcome in which they would exist, their welfare *should* count for the comparison of outcomes. Without an explanation, despite the advantage of avoiding the objections against Absolute Prioritarianism, such restrictions are ad hoc.

⁴³ Holtug (2007: 9–12 and 2010: ch. 9) discusses and rejects both strategies.

Comparative Prioritarianism fares much better. First, it is applicable to variable-population comparisons and, thus, has an unrestricted scope. By contrast to a restricted version of Absolute Comparativism, as it has been discussed by Parfit, Broome and others, Comparative Prioritarianism applies to all comparisons of outcomes, no matter whether the number or identity of the individuals differs. Second, and just as the restricted versions, Comparative Prioritarianism remains silent on the part of the comparison that deals with variable populations, but without relying on some ad hoc restriction to fixed-population comparisons. Instead, it offers a plausible explanation: only the *comparative benefits* of individuals matter (and, consequently, matter more the worse-off these individuals are). If Existence-Comparativism is false, and if individuals exist in only one of two compared outcomes, no comparative benefits are befalling them. They just exist at some welfare level, or they do not exist. Therefore, while the implausible implications of Absolute Prioritarianism can be avoided only by restricting its scope of application, Comparative Prioritarianism nicely explains why Prioritarianism does not assign moral value to the welfare of individuals who exist in only one of the compared outcomes. Hence, Comparative Prioritarianism is not ad hoc, broadly applicable, and, thus, superior to a restricted version of Absolute Prioritarianism.

4.2 *The Non-Identity Problem and the Problem of Suffering*

Comparative Prioritarianism is silent on variable-population comparisons and, thus, fails to solve two famous problems of population ethics because it does not assign moral value to the welfare of individuals who exist in only one of two compared outcomes. First, it is confronted with the Non-Identity Problem because the existence of a very happy individual rather than the existence of a less happy individual does not make an outcome better when both individuals would not exist in the alternative, respectively. Second, it does not provide a solution for the Problem of Suffering because the existence of an additional individual with a bad life makes an outcome worse. Therefore, one might claim, Comparative Prioritarianism fails.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ An alternative that I do not discuss here is to conceive comparative welfare *interpersonally* (or to claim that welfare losses should be understood in a *de dicto* rather than in a *de re* sense). For such strategies, although not specifically for Prioritarianism, see Hare 2007, Meacham 2012, and Bader 2022. However, such strategies do not solve the Problem of Suffering either and they apply a *pseudo* person-affecting way of considering the welfare gains and losses of different possible individuals as if they were the gains and losses of one; see Harney 2023

However, the objection assumes that Comparative Prioritarianism would provide all-things-considered assessments of outcomes. That is not so. Comparative Prioritarianism spells out only *one respect* in which outcomes are better or worse, and the two problems are precisely the reasons why. Comparative Prioritarianism can, and should, be supplemented with a further principle that accounts for the moral value of the welfare of individuals who exist in only one of the compared outcomes. I cannot comprehensively argue here for a particular principle that Comparative Prioritarianism should be combined with. Let me just mention a few possibilities.

First, people who were ready to accept Absolute Prioritarianism are well advised to combine Comparative Prioritarianism with a principle that invokes a simple total sum function of welfare in a utilitarian spirit. This implies the Repugnant Conclusion but avoids the Super-Repugnant Conclusion and welfare diffusion by creating people. The combination is thus more plausible than Absolute Prioritarianism. Second, if you are worried about the Repugnant Conclusion or if you believe more generally that we have no moral reason to create people just because they would have a good life, you might restrict the total sum function to *negative* absolute welfare. This avoids the Repugnant Conclusion and solves the Problem of Suffering. Third, more complex or even non-additive functions would be possible.

Importantly, all the options are combinable with Comparative Prioritarianism and, thus, with the claim that benefits to people who are worse off matter more. Consequently, Comparative Prioritarianism allows us to endorse the prioritarian idea without settling the highly complex and controversial issues of variable populations and how to deal with absolute welfare in general. Therefore, the plural character of Comparative Prioritarianism is a point in its favour rather than a problem.⁴⁵

4.3 *Set-Wise Comparisons against Cyclicity*

In comparisons of more than two outcomes, Comparative Prioritarianism seems to imply cyclical orderings of outcomes. Consider the comparison of Q, R, and S.

⁴⁵ For general discussion of ways to combine the moral reasons provided by comparative welfare and absolute welfare, see Harney 2026.

Q:	S ₁ exists at level 1	S ₂ exists at level 5	S ₃ does not exist
R:	S ₁ does not exist	S ₂ exists at level 1	S ₃ exists at level 5
S:	S ₁ exists at level 5	S ₂ does not exist	S ₃ exists at level 1

In each pairwise comparison, one individual is better off, and one individual is worse off, each by 4 units of welfare. Thus, Comparative Prioritarianism seems to imply that, in one respect,

- (1) Q is better than R,
- (2) R is better than S, and
- (3) S is better than Q.

Furthermore, since the absolute welfare profile is identical in all three outcomes, those assessments seem to transfer to all-things-considered betterness. However, (1), (2), and (3) are cyclical, which gives rise to two objections. First, Comparative Prioritarianism would violate acyclicity: the demand that the orderings of outcomes must not be cyclical. Second, it would imply contradictions because, assuming that better-than is a transitive relation, each two of the three assessments jointly contradict the third.

We can overcome the second objection by rejecting the transitivity of the better-than relation. This should not come as a surprise. Comparative Prioritarianism is an essentially comparative view according to which “the factors that are relevant for making different all-things-considered judgments can vary [...] depending on what alternatives are compared” (Temkin 2012: 363). Following Larry Temkin’s analyses, we cannot expect the transitivity of the better-than relation to hold for essentially comparative views.⁴⁶

In response to the second objection, however, we cannot just reject acyclicity. Cyclical orderings are extremely implausible. If a theory implies them, no outcome is maximal, and, thus, the theory does not provide any deliberative guidance. Assuming that we ought to bring about a better outcome, by contrast, the theory implies that we cannot but act wrongly. Whatever outcome we choose to bring about, there will always be a better outcome that we should bring about instead, which is absurd. Thus, we need a more complex solution to counter the first objection.

⁴⁶ Cf. Temkin 2012: secs. 7.6–7.7, ch. 12. See also Temkin 1987, 1996, and Rachels 2004 for further arguments in favour of rejecting transitivity.

We can avoid cyclicity by comparing the three outcomes Q, R, and S together and not in pairs: we need to compare outcomes set-wise rather than pairwise.⁴⁷ To do so, we assess the set-relative moral value for each outcome that incorporates the weighted gains and losses in that outcome relative to all alternatives, not just relative to one. More formally, let $V_{\{A, B, C\}}(A)$ be the set-relative moral value for A in the option set $\{A, B, C\}$, and u_{A_s} the welfare level of an individual s in A . Furthermore, let S_O be the set of individuals existing in an outcome O . $V_{\{A, B, C\}}(A)$ can then be calculated by the

Three-Outcome-Set-Relative Moral Value for Comparative Prioritarianism

In comparing three outcomes A , B , and C , A 's set-relative moral value (in one respect) is defined as $V_{\{A, B, C\}}(A) = \sum_{s \in S_A \cap S_B} g(\frac{u_{A_s} + u_{B_s}}{2}, u_{A_s} - u_{B_s}) + \sum_{s \in S_A \cap S_C} g(\frac{u_{A_s} + u_{C_s}}{2}, u_{A_s} - u_{C_s})$, where g is a multiplying function that is strictly decreasing in the first argument and strictly increasing in the second argument.

The principle assesses the set-relative moral value of A by calculating the sum of the weighted comparative benefits in A relative to both B and C and adding up the resulting sums. We can calculate the set-relative moral value for each of the three outcomes accordingly. In addition, we need a principle that defines the ordering of the outcomes based on the set-relative moral value:

Three-Outcomes-Set Comparative Prioritarianism

In comparing three outcomes A , B , and C , A is (in one respect) morally at least as good as B iff A 's set-relative value $V_{\{A, B, C\}}(A)$ is at least as high as B 's set-relative moral value $V_{\{A, B, C\}}(B)$.

On this *set-wise approach*, Q, R, and S are equally good, relative to the option-set $\{Q, R, S\}$, because each outcome involves one gain and one loss of 4 units for an individual, all of them occurring with the same arithmetic mean of the individuals' welfare levels. That result fits what we would intuitively think about the case. Furthermore, the approach guarantees acyclicity

⁴⁷ For a more general defence of the set-wise approach independently of Prioritarianism see Harney forthcoming: ch. 13.

within fixed sets of outcomes. If the set does not change, the set-relative values of the outcomes do not change either. The outcomes are ranked by their set-relative value. And since “has a higher numerical value” is a transitivity relation, any resulting ordering will be acyclical. Within fixed sets of outcomes, furthermore, the better-than relation is even transitive.

To complete that task, the approach needs to be extended to comparisons of arbitrarily many outcomes. We can do so by extrapolating the three-outcomes version as follows.

Set-Wise Comparative Prioritarianism

In comparing x outcomes A, B, \dots, X , A 's set-relative moral value (in one respect)

$$\text{is defined as } V_{\{A, B, \dots, X\}}(A) = \sum_{s \in S_A \cap S_B} g\left(\frac{u_{A_s} + u_{B_s}}{2}, u_{A_s} - u_{B_s}\right) + \sum_{s \in S_A \cap S_C} g\left(\frac{u_{A_s} + u_{C_s}}{2}, u_{A_s} - u_{C_s}\right) + \dots + \sum_{s \in S_A \cap S_X} g\left(\frac{u_{A_s} + u_{X_s}}{2}, u_{A_s} - u_{X_s}\right),$$

where g is a multiplying function that is strictly decreasing in the first argument and strictly increasing in the second argument.

A is (in one respect) morally at least as good as B iff A 's set-relative value $V_{\{A, B, \dots, X\}}(A)$ is at least as high as B 's set-relative moral value $V_{\{A, B, \dots, X\}}(B)$.

5 Conclusion

I have argued that the common construal of Prioritarianism as Absolute Prioritarianism is deficient in variable-population comparisons – at least on the assumption that Existence-Comparativism is false. It absurdly implies the Super-Repugnant Conclusion and the desirability of welfare diffusion by creating people. This is so because “benefits” are interpreted as absolute rather than as comparative. I have offered Comparative Prioritarianism as an alternative, according to which the individuals' gains and losses, not their absolute welfare, are prioritised the worse off an individual is. This avoids the flaws of Absolute Prioritarianism. It spells out only one respect in which outcomes can be better and, thus, remains open to be supplemented by further principles that solve the problems of variable-population comparisons. Furthermore, the set-wise approach avoids cyclical orderings of outcomes by guaranteeing acyclicity and transitivity within fixed sets of outcomes. Thus, I conclude, if we take the Prioritarian route and at least if we doubt Existence-Comparativism, we are well advised to adopt Comparative Prioritarianism rather than Absolute Prioritarianism.

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