

BOOK NOTE

Harry Frankfurt: *On inequality*

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Harry Frankfurt's *On inequality* is a small, two-part book that argues against the idea that economic egalitarianism—or simply put, equality—is a moral good in and of itself. Like Frankfurt's previous philosophical bestseller, *On bullshit* (2005), it is a slightly revised version of previous work published in scholarly journals. The first part is based on "Equality as a moral ideal," which appeared in *Ethics* 98 (1) (October 1987), and the second part is based on "Equality and respect," which appeared in *Social Research* 64 (1) (Spring 1997). The impetus for returning to the topic, as Frankfurt explains in the preface, is the recent public conversation sparked by Thomas Piketty's popular 2013 book, *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Here, Piketty discusses the widening income gap, warning against the curtailment of our liberties as a result of the unstoppable trend of economic inequality. Unless subjected to some form of income regulation like a wealth tax, the minority who own capital will tend to acquire greater and greater social and political influence.

In his book, Frankfurt makes the disclaimer that his arguments are not meant to advance any social or political ideology, arising as they do from purely conceptual or analytic interests. The first part opens with his observation that it is not the inequality of incomes that is the problem, but the poverty of too many people. He supports this idea with the intuition that if everybody had enough, then the fact that some may have more than others would not be much of a concern. This, coupled with the objectionable "economic gluttony" of the very rich, suggests that we should try to reduce both poverty and excessive wealth. But while this measure may very well entail the reduction of inequality, Frankfurt maintains that economic egalitarianism *per se* should not be our essential goal.

Economic egalitarianism is "the doctrine that it is desirable for everyone to have the same amounts of income and of wealth." Frankfurt suggests replacing this misguided ideal with what he calls the "doctrine of sufficiency," or the notion that what is morally important with regard to money is that everyone should have enough. "Having enough" is indispensable for a good life, while "having an equal share" derives its value from other goods it may lead to: for example, the possibility of social harmony and the maintenance of democracy. Equality therefore has at best only a derivative value; from this, it follows that it is a *formal*, rather than a *substantive*, characteristic. From an equal relationship between two items, "nothing whatever follows as to the desirability or value of either, or of the relationship between them." What is of genuine moral concern is instead "whether people have good lives, and not how their lives compare with the lives of others."

Because the ideal of equality fosters social comparison, Frankfurt argues that it leads to a form of alienation: It encourages an individual to focus on desires and needs that may not actually be his or her own. It is in this way that exaggerating the moral value of equality may be harmful. It detracts from other concerns that are more worthy of consideration, such as the thorny question of what “having enough” means. “Having enough” is a highly individual and personal heuristic, whereas “having an equal share” is more transparent and superficial. Frankfurt argues that it would certainly satisfy no one’s sense of justice if everyone were identically poor. Thus, he surmises that what truly motivates egalitarians is not so much equality *per se* as the imperative of sufficiency.

In addition to these conceptual reflections, Frankfurt lobs another major attack against the purported moral value of economic egalitarianism. He presents a penetrating critique of the *principle of diminishing marginal utility*, according to which the aggregate utility of money would be greater under equal distribution. Frankfurt cites Abba Lerner, who believes that as an individual’s income increases, the less satisfaction he or she gets from the additional things that can be bought with it. A rational consumer would prioritize things of greater utility or value given a limited amount of spending power; if the spending power were greater, only previously forgone items, i.e., those deemed of lesser value, would be left to be obtained. The marginal utility of any increase in income thus diminishes over time. A system in which there is a huge wealth gap means that a high-spending minority could derive only so much utility from their income. Equalizing the income level would result in a greater total amount of utility experienced by everybody. The principle of diminishing marginal utility therefore supports the ideal of equality.

Frankfurt offers three main arguments against this way of thinking. First, increasing the income of the majority would result in greater demand for certain goods. As the prices of these goods rise, people’s spending power would decrease—thereby offsetting any increase in the aggregate utility of money. Second, Frankfurt rejects Lerner’s reasoning concerning the law of marginal decline. There are certain cases in which the utility of an additionally purchased item may be greater than the combined utility of the ones previously obtained. This is true in the case of a collector who is about to complete his collection: the last item purchased gives him more satisfaction than the previous ones, in view of the completion of the collection. This is also true of someone who had not previously purchased a certain object, not because it is less valuable than the ones she had prioritized, but because it had formerly been beyond her spending power. Thus, the law of marginal decline is not universally applicable. In any case, in general *money* must surely be exempt from this law because, unlike non-fungible goods, it is infinitely versatile. Even if an individual’s satisfaction from obtaining a certain object or service does decrease over time, the same could not be said about obtaining more money, which could be used to purchase various objects or services.

Frankfurt’s *coup de grace* against the utility-based defense of the moral value of equality consists in his third argument, whereby he asserts that under certain conditions, the egalitarian distribution of goods actually *minimizes* aggregate utility. He presents a thought experiment wherein there are 40 units of available resources to be divided among ten people, each of whom needs at least five units in order to survive. In this case, the maximum aggregate utility could be reached if the goods were divided unequally, i.e., eight people get at least five and the remaining two get nothing. If the resources

were divided equally, each person would get four units—not enough to survive—meaning none of them would have much use for their equal share. Frankfurt uses this thought experiment to point out “the fundamental error of economic egalitarianism,” which is the idea that “it is morally important whether one person has less than another, regardless of how much either of them has and regardless also of how much utility each derives from what he has.” For Frankfurt, each person “having enough” is what we should aim for. The comparative computations of egalitarianism are irrelevant to figuring out what it is that leads to a person being satisfied with his or her life.

The second part of the book builds on the ideas presented in the first, primarily Frankfurt’s categorical rejection of the intrinsic moral value of equality. Here he elaborates on the concept of respect or impartiality, an intrinsic moral good which may occasionally involve the assumption of equality. He writes that the moral value of equality is often exaggerated because of a fundamental confusion between treating people *equally* and treating them *with respect*. Frankfurt’s view of what respect entails rests on a premise concerning what a person properly has a right to or is entitled to: namely, that it should be based on what one is or has done, rather than whether others are entitled to it as well. Treating a person with respect means dealing with him or her in terms of *relevant* aspects. It precludes special advantages or disadvantages, and involves impartiality and the avoidance of arbitrariness. It is only when we know nothing about the relevant circumstances of a person that we are constrained to treat him or her the same way as everyone else. However, this is not mandated by the morality of equality itself, but by the moral demands of respect or impartiality.

Frankfurt is not without his critics. The most salient objection comes not from the philosophical quarters, but from the social sciences. David Hirschman, a lecturer in economic sociology at the University of Michigan, asks in his piece for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, “Who exactly is Frankfurt arguing against?” (see <https://lareviewofbooks.org/review/enough-is-not-enough-on-harry-frankfurts-on-inequality>, February 5, 2016). He claims that Frankfurt has not cited or engaged “examples of actual egalitarian discourse,” which in any case are not vulnerable to his criticism of inequality as a “sacred” moral precept. Hirschman observes that political debates on the left also—in agreement with Frankfurt—put focus on fighting inequality only to the extent that it produces negative effects. Hirschman further takes issue with Frankfurt’s “desert island”-style conceptual experiment concerning the optimal though unequal division of resources among ten people, whereby eight get enough to survive and two get none: “Fair enough, and worth keeping in mind if one is trapped on a desert island with precise knowledge of one’s food supply and time to rescue.” For Hirschman, this sort of move, while typical of a philosopher, is ultimately irrelevant to policy-making. Finally, he decries what he sees as Frankfurt’s dismissal of the popular call for equality as a form of “crass materialism,” i.e., in reference to the philosopher’s criticism of the overvaluation of egalitarianism as precipitating alienation by way of social comparison. Hirschman writes, “From the vantage point of 2015, the current mobilization for economic justice seems to be a very healthy political response to the worsening inequality of the past 30 years and the attendant negative consequences.”

Be that as it may, I believe it is easy to denounce a philosopher for problematizing the conceptual foundations of popular sentiments, and to accuse him or her of being

out of touch with actual political debates. But it is precisely from this disciplinary distance that Frankfurt offers his most useful contribution: a nuanced, non-political rethinking of what “equality” truly means and entails. His analysis actually gets confirmation from the feminists—whose thinking is necessarily rooted in political commitment—and who have long since recognized that genuine egalitarianism should not be conflated with “sameness” or “identity,” and should therefore allow for the recognition of differences.

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