

## Harry Frankfurt "Equality and Respect"

### Background

This debate really from two influential papers Frankfurt wrote. One of which is "Equality as a Moral Ideal" (1987) and "Equality and Respect" (1997). In the first paper, Frankfurt argues against *economic* egalitarianism: an equal distribution of money as a moral value, and he does so on 2 stages:

- 1) There are no good arguments that stand up to this conclusion  
Ex/ Argument from *Diminishing Marginal Utility*
- 2) The intuitions that most of those arguments use that seem to favor the distribution, actually favor something else.

**Social Comparison** - It is whether people have good lives, and not how their lives compare with the lives of others." (Frankfurt 1997, p. 6) And again: "The fundamental error of egalitarianism lies in supposing that it is morally important whether one person has less than another regardless of how much either of them has." (Frankfurt 1987, p. 34)

**The Doctrine of Sufficiency**, according to which "What is important from the moral point of view is not that everyone should have *the same* but that each should have *enough*. If everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others." (Frankfurt "Equality as a Moral Ideal" 1987, p. 21)

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For reasons of brevity, we won't discuss much further about the first of Frankfurt's paper (such as "how do you determine what *is enough* under the doctrine of sufficiency? Can this be objective?"), we'll limit this discussion to Frankfurt's connection between Equality and Respect.

•Frankfurt starts the second paper by giving us a caveat: "I propose to deal here with issues that pertain to the alleged moral value of equality. So far as I am aware, nothing that I shall say concerning these issues implies anything of substances as to the kinds of social or political policies that it may be desirable to pursue or avoid. My discussion is motivated exclusively by conceptual or analytic concerns [...] I categorically reject the presumption that egalitarianism, of whatever variety, is an ideal of any *intrinsic, moral* importance," he doesn't deny that it has importance in terms of other ends.

-In "**Equality and Respect**," Frankfurt essentially claims that when we reference the people deserve things like "equal concern" and "respect" means in fact pointing to *impartiality*, and he rejects the idea that we should identify some degree of concern and respect as dependent upon the notion of equality.

•It is true that we owe each individual a certain (and equal) dose of respect and that it would simply be "arbitrary and disrespectful" to treat people differently given the same amount of information. But the reason for this is not because such treatment is unequal, but because it violates some basic notion of impartiality that requires "we treat everyone the same" in the sense

that we do not go beyond the scope of what is relevant to the occasion. Ex/ The hiring of your niece

-Frankfurt offers an equally intriguing and persuasive argument for his view that no “mode of equality,” whether of resources, welfare, opportunity, respect, rights, consideration, and concern is “intrinsically valuable” (p. 147). This directly challenges claims made by other philosophers such as Nagel’s who propose “How could it not be an evil that some people’s life prospects at birth are radically inferior to others?”<sup>1</sup> Frankfurt notes that, since even a life radically inferior to those of others may still be a good life, there is no necessary connection between having a low social position and having a low quality of life.

- If “a person has enough resources to provide for the satisfaction of his needs and his interests, his resources are entirely adequate; their adequacy does not depend in addition upon the magnitude of the resources that other people possess” (p. 149). Frankfurt acknowledges that there are those whose lives are radically inferior compared to others to such a degree that they fall “decisively below the threshold that separates lives that are good from lives that are not good” (p. 148); but it is not the fact that some people have better lives that makes it true that others have bad lives. The “evil is simply in the unmistakable fact that bad lives are bad” (p. 148). When a person judges their life to be bad, it should be clear whether or not they are judging it relative to the specific quality of *their* life and particular needs

**What IS the fundamental difference between equality and respect?** Frankfurt says it has to do with two things: (1) Focus and (2) Intent. When we’re talking about equality of whatever form, (opportunity, welfare, rights or considerations etc), it’s strictly a matter of each person having the same as others. But for Frankfurt, “Respect is more personal.” Treating someone with respect means “dealing with them exclusively on the basis of those aspects of his particular character or circumstances that are actually relevant to the issue at hand.”

What is involved in respecting a person? “Treating persons with respect precludes assigning them special advantages or disadvantages except on the basis of considerations that differentiate relevantly among them” (p. 150). Since respecting persons “entails impartiality and the avoidance of arbitrariness,” while a concern with equality aims at “outcomes that are in some pertinent way indistinguishable,” “the direction in which a desire for equality points may diverge from the direction in which an interest in respect and impartiality lead” (p. 150).

-Frankfurt concludes by arguing that it is respect for persons, rather than some form of equality between them, that is morally imperative because “[t]here is a sense in which being guided by what is relevant – thus treating relevantly similar cases alike and relevantly unlike cases differently – is an elementary aspect of being rational” (p.152). Accordingly, being “impartial and respectful is a special case of being rational in this sense.” Since it “is desirable that people be rational,” it must also be desirable that persons be respectful, even if in so doing they fail to treat people equally in one way or another (p. 152).

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<sup>1</sup> Nagel, Thomas. *Equality and Partiality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

-In the paper, Frankfurt highlights how someone can be legitimately offended by inegalitarian treatment, though he is 'quite satisfied that he has as much of everything as he can use' (Frankfurt: 1999: 150). The thought is that this inequality of condition might still be objectionable, though sufficiency is met, if there is an agent responsible for this discrepancy, and that agent failed to distribute advantages and/or disadvantages treating each person with respect (that is: impartially and without arbitrariness). **Frankfurt's point is that still, in this case, the claim of equality is derivative: it is grounded in the more fundamental moral notions of respect and impartiality. For Frankfurt, the person has simply confused being treated disrespectfully with being treated unequally.**

**So, why would someone like Frankfurt favor certain governmental policies supporting equality (in one form of another) if it is of no moral value?** In the second paper, he responds to this by saying it's not out of a conviction to equality of some kind as morally desirable for its own sake, but rather "it is a more contingent and pragmatically grounded belief that in many circumstances greater equality of one sort or another would facilitate the pursuit of other socially desirable aims"

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<sup>2</sup> \*In writing this handout, I did consult and use lines from other texts explaining Frankfurt's views. However, this handout is intended solely for education purposes and I unfortunately have since forgotten the sources I consulted.