

Book Reviews

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On Inequality, by Harry G. Frankfurt. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015, 120 pages, ISBN: 9780691167145.

On Inequality by Harry G. Frankfurt brings together slightly altered versions of two journal articles that question the intrinsic or fundamental value of equality (Harry Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal”, *Ethics* 98(1), 1987, 21-43; and “Equality and Respect”, *Social Research* 64(1), 1997, 3-15. See also “The Moral Irrelevance of Equality”, *Public Affairs Quarterly* 14(2), 2000, 87-103).

The first question that prospective readers of this book will be asking themselves is how similar the material in the book is to the two journal articles on which it is based. In addition to the brief discussion of Barack Obama’s state of the union address from December 2013 and Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty First Century*, there are a large number of small changes. More significant passages that can be found in the original that are missing from the book’s version of “Equality as a Moral Ideal” include the discussion of Thomas Nagel and Ronald Dworkin (which can be found on pages 35-37 and 33-34 of “Equality as a Moral Ideal” respectively) as examples of thinkers who make the sorts of mistakes Frankfurt urges us to avoid and the appendix, which discusses John Rawls. Readers may welcome the decision to include footnotes 11 and 12 of the original in the main text of the book, which helpfully explain points about diminishing marginal utility in a less technical manner than the original (26-27). I could identify only a few very small differences between the original 1997 version of “Equality and Respect” and the book version. The effect of the alternations is to make the material marginally clearer and less cumbersome to read.

Many readers will be familiar with Frankfurt’s ground-breaking and highly influential work in many areas of philosophy including his 1987 paper “Equality as a Moral Ideal”, which inspired contemporary sufficientarianism, the view that securing enough of some

good(s) is an especially important moral demand. Readers are likely to be less familiar with his 1997 “Equality and Respect”, which picks apart the notions of respect and equality. Taken together the two papers in this book argue for a rejection of intrinsic, fundamental or non-derivative value of equality and argue that our reasons to value equality can be traced back to sufficiency and respect. Throughout the book Frankfurt urges us to consider the mistake we make when we constrain our reflections on what makes a life valuable by the cost of other’s ambitions or work out what we owe to other people based on comparisons with others and not the conspicuous features of their situation, such as their needs and interests. I will now provide a summary of each paper in turn following each with some critical remarks before concluding.

In the first part of the book, “Equality as a Moral Ideal”, Frankfurt makes two main points. The first is that economic equality has no intrinsic value and that an ideal of economic equality encourages us to determine our life plans by comparing it to the costliness of others’ plans. In Frankfurt’s own words:

the false belief that economic equality is important for its own sake leads people to separate the problem of estimating their proper monetary ambitions from the problem of what is most fundamentally significant to themselves (13).

How much money a person requires to live a content or reasonable life, for that is what really matters, is highly unlikely to be the same as what others require. Only where the same or equal amounts of money are *sufficient* are they actually morally desirable. Thus, equality is not intrinsically or fundamentally valuable.

This brings us to the second aim, which is to show that sufficiency, not equality, ought to be our moral ideal and that “from the point of view of morality, it is not important that everyone should have *the same*. What is morally important is that each should have enough” (7). In the end Frankfurt endorses a sufficiency principle that holds that everyone should have enough and that a person has enough when she is content with the level of contentment in her life. This level of contentment is indicated by the absence of an active interest in securing more (53).

Before I make two critical points about the argument it is worth stating the important contribution of the paper that this part of the

book is based on, which was to prompt many people to reconsider the value of equality and the place of considerations of sufficiency within distributive justice and ethics. Perhaps most striking is the idea that if everyone had secured enough it would be of no consequence that some had more than others. It certainly prompts us to think carefully about whether we care about people being equally well-off or well-off rather than badly-off, fundamentally. This and other ideas in this paper have led to the development and theorisation of sufficiency as a rival distributive ideal to equality. Such development is inconceivable without the publication of this paper.

The first critical point I will make concerns the target of Frankfurt's attention: the intrinsic value of economic equality. Neither Piketty nor Obama, who are discussed in the introduction and preface, make this claim. The attention that they pay to equality or inequality could better be cashed out in terms of an instrumental concern that inequality can be bad for other reasons. Nor are they claims that contemporary political or moral philosophers make, who, insofar as they endorse equality as fundamentally valuable prefer equality of welfare to equality of economic resources and typically do not hold equality to be the only thing that matters. (See, for example, Larry Temkin, "Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection", in *The Ideal of Equality*, ed. by Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams, Macmillan, 2000, 126-161.) Even if one did hold the view that it was in itself good for everyone to have equal money it is possible to hold that there are other, weightier, fundamental values, which could lead to an overall moral theory that was not vulnerable to Frankfurt's critique. As such, and insofar as we take these claims to apply *only* to their intended target, the claims lack significance (and the re-issue seems to lack motivation). When reading this part of the book it is not hard to see that the arguments have wider application, but one cannot help but be a bit annoyed that a straw-man stands in for equality.

A second critical point relates to objections that Frankfurt's arguments are vulnerable to. In the last 27 years the doctrine of sufficiency has generated several compelling objections. I will note three such objections. (Many of these objections, as well as a close study of the anatomy of sufficientarian positions, are contained in Paula Casal, "Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough", *Ethics* 117(2), 2007, 296-326.)

The first objection, we might call the *Indifference Objection* and it holds that the doctrine of sufficiency is implausible because it implies that we should be indifferent to inequalities among those with enough. (The term ‘indifference objection’ comes from my “The prospects for sufficientarianism”, *Utilitas* 24(1), 2012, 101-117. The objection is noted in Richard Arneson, “Distributive Ethics and Basic Capability Equality: ‘Good Enough’ is Not Good Enough”, in *Capabilities Equality: Basic Issues and Problems*, ed. by A. Kaufman, Routledge, 2005, 17-43: 26-33; Yitzhak Benbaji, “The doctrine of sufficiency: A defence”, *Utilitas* 17(3), 2005, 310-332; Yitzhak Benbaji, “Sufficiency or Priority?”, *European Journal of Philosophy* 14(3), 2006, 327-48; Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, “Educational equality versus educational adequacy: A critique of Anderson and Satz”, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 26(2), 2009, 117-128: 125-6; Casal, “Why Sufficiency is not Enough”, 298-300 and 310-314; Nils Holtug, “Prioritarianism”, in *Egalitarianism: New Essays on the Nature and Value of Equality*, ed. by N. Holtug and K. Lippert-Rasmussen, Oxford, 2006, 125-155: 149-154; Robert Huseby, “Sufficiency: restated and defended”, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18(2), 2010, 178-197: 190; Larry S. Temkin, “Equality, priority or what?”, *Economics and Philosophy* 19(1), 2003, 61-87: 65-66 and “Egalitarianism Defended”, *Ethics* 113(4), 2003, 764-782: 765-6 and 769-776. For a similarly worrying implication of this view see Karl Widerquist, “How the Sufficiency Minimum Becomes a Social Maximum”, *Utilitas* 22(4), 2010, 474-480.) If there are only two groups of people, one is extremely contented and the other is adequately contented, it is plausible to think that any necessary taxation should be progressive and that any additional benefits that become available should go to the least contented rather than the most contented. (For an interesting discussion of how sufficientarians like Frankfurt may be able to explain why progressive taxation is justified see Philipp Kanschik, “Why Sufficientarianism is not Indifferent to Taxation”, *Kriterion* 29(2), 2015, 81-102.) The doctrine as stated cannot account for this intuition. More troubling, however, seems to be the implication of the doctrine that we should be indifferent about wasting additional benefits or indeed levelling the extremely contented down to the level of the adequately contented. This is not a knock-down objection to the doctrine of sufficiency, but some explanation and defence is required.

Another concern regards the threshold of contentment. (Casal, “Why sufficiency is not enough”; Robert E. Goodin, “Egalitarianism, fetishistic and otherwise”, *Ethics* 98(1), 1987, 44-49; Huseby, “Sufficiency: restated and defended.”) Frankfurt claims that a person has enough when she is content with the level of contentment in her life. But this is compatible with people being authentically satisfied with low levels of satisfaction or high levels of satisfaction because they internalise pernicious norms about their own social status being lower or higher than others. Here an egalitarian background, against which conceptions of satisfaction are formed, seems appropriate. But even with an appropriate background against which people form their expectations, some people could form much more expensive tastes and ambitions than others. It is not clear that resulting inequalities would be unproblematic if, for example, some get very large and expensive houses while some live in small ones simply because they have authentic preferences for them. (Gerald A. Cohen, “On the currency of egalitarian justice”, *Ethics* 99(4), 1989, 906-944; Ronald Dworkin, “What is equality? Part 1: Equality of welfare”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 10(3), 1981, 185-246.) Perhaps our ambitions are something we should take responsibility for the costs of.

One final criticism is that the doctrine of sufficiency is radically incomplete, offering us no guidance where we cannot ensure that any or all people secure enough. This seems especially important since it is possible that we will lack the economic resources to ensure that people have enough to be content with their level of contentment in the foreseeable future. One suggestion in the paper is that we maximize the number of people who have enough, which Frankfurt mentions when discussing the scarcity case, but that view is highly problematic. (For advocacy of headcount sufficientarianism see Dale Dorsey, “Toward a Theory of the Basic Minimum”, *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 7(4), 2008, 423-45: 432-7; Ed Page, *Climate Change, Justice and Future Generations*, Edward Elgar, 2006, 85-95; Ed Page, “Justice between generations: Investigating a sufficientarian approach”, *Journal of Global Ethics* 3(1), 2007, 3-20: 11; Roemer, “Eclectic Distributional Ethics”, 273-4 and 278-9; Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal”, 31.) It may lead to benefitting those who are close to the threshold by tiny amounts at huge cost to those who are further from the threshold. Of course, incompleteness is not an objection,

but it is a limitation that would need to be addressed before we could endorse the doctrine.

In light of these criticisms an increasingly large body of literature has taken on the task of defending sufficiency as a distinctive and indispensable distributive ideal. Generally speaking advocates have modified the doctrine of sufficiency to avoid or respond better to the objections in one of three ways.

Some have denied what Casal calls the negative thesis: that once people have enough we have no reasons to be concerned about distributions. (Benbaji, "Sufficiency or Priority?"; Campbell Brown, "Priority or Sufficiency... or Both?", *Economics and Philosophy* 21(2), 2005, 199-220; Shields, "The Prospects for Sufficiency"; Andrew Williams, "Liberty, Equality, and Property", *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, ed. by J. Dryzek, B. Honig and A. Philips, Oxford University Press, 2006, 488-506: 501-3.) These sufficientarians have stressed that securing enough is the first priority but thereafter we should be concerned with inequalities or the least advantaged. Others have utilised multiple thresholds. (Benbaji, "The doctrine of sufficiency"; Casal, "Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough"; Huseby, "Sufficiency: restated and defended"; Roemer, "Eclectic Distributional Ethics".) These sufficientarians claim to have a high threshold above which indifference is genuinely not troubling and a lower threshold that captures the special urgency of meeting basic needs or securing survival. Finally, some have adopted a pluralist currency and argue that this can explain why we should not be concerned with inequalities because intuitively troubling inequalities are always insufficiencies in some dimension. (David V. Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen, "Sufficiency as freedom from duress", *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 24(4), 2015, 406-426; Huseby "Sufficiency: restated and defended". Capabilities theorists also seem to employ this feature. See Martha C Nussbaum, *Women and human development: The capabilities approach*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.) These views are themselves not without their critics, but given the amount of well-established literature devoted to criticising and defending the views it is a shame that an updated version of the paper was not updated in light of them.

In the second part of the book, "Equality and Respect" Frankfurt's target is different. Rather than criticizing economic equality he focusses on equality of all kinds, including equality of welfare,

resources and opportunity. In particular, he contrasts the general idea of equality, treating people the same, with the idea of respect, treating people in accordance with their morally relevant features, and argues again to the conclusion that equality has no inherent value because equality is only valuable where it coincides with the demands of respect, which is what really matters.

The paper takes as its jumping-off point Nagel's comment that "How could it not be an evil that some people's life prospects at birth are radically inferior to others'?" (quoted in Frankfurt: 69). Two main points are made. The first dovetails nicely the sufficientarian arguments of the first part:

The egalitarian condemnation of inequality as inherently bad loses much of its force, I believe, when we recognize that those who are doing considerably worse than others may nonetheless be doing rather well. (71).

This relative lack of concern we feel once we know that the least well off in an unequal society are, in absolute terms, well off is one of the important intuitive drivers in the work. Roger Crisp makes good use of this intuition in his defence of sufficientarianism. (R. Crisp, "Equality, Priority, and Compassion", *Ethics*, 113(4), 2003, 745-63.)

Frankfurt explains the difference between respect and equality in the following passage,

The most fundamental difference between equality and respect has to do with focus and intent. With regard to any interesting parameter — whether it pertains to resources, welfare, opportunity, right, consideration, concern, or whatever — equality is merely a matter of each person's having the same as others. Respect is more personal. Treating a person with respect means, in the sense that is germane here, dealing with him exclusively on the basis of those aspects of his particular character or circumstances that are actually relevant to the issue at hand. (77-78)

In arguing for respect and against equality as a presumptive or default value, Frankfurt states that

It may be that the entitlements of all people to certain things are in fact the same. If this were to be so, however, it would not be because equality is important. Rather, it would be because all people happen to be the same, or are necessarily the same, with regard to the characteristics from which the entitlements in question derive — for instance, common humanity, a capacity for suffering, citizenship in the kingdom of ends, or whatever. (75-76)

However, the idea of treating people in accordance with morally relevant characteristics and not in accordance with morally irrelevant characteristics, as an alternative to equality, is simply to go back one step to a more formal notion than equality. It remains to be shown that this view is best fleshed out in ways that are different from equality. No doubt many political philosophers, including Luck Egalitarians and Rawlsians, see their distributive principles as entirely consistent with this idea. Moreover, in justifying principles of justice itself through contractual procedures many believe that we do well to ignore their differences and personal characteristics, such as sex, race, religion, social class and particular plans or ambitions and only take our shared human capacities for moral and rational agency as a basis for the distribution of benefits and burdens. (See for example R. Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, Harvard University Press, 2001; J. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: a restatement*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.) As such, it is not clear to what extent these insights have not already been incorporated or rejected in contemporary egalitarian theories, especially so-called relational egalitarianism. (E. Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?", *Ethics* 109(2), 1999, 287-337; Christian Schemmel, "Distributive and relational equality", *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 11(2), 2012, 123-148; Samuel Scheffler, "What is Egalitarianism?", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 31(1), 2003, 5-39.)

In summary, the papers in this book are extremely similar to those readers will likely be familiar with and, for an academic philosopher, there's nothing new of importance in this presentation. However, the papers are interesting and important and should be widely read.

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