

Book Reviews

Frankfurt, Harry G. *On Inequality*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Harry Frankfurt's book *On Inequality* has been released at a crucial time in public discussions about economic inequality. This is no coincidence, as Frankfurt himself says in the preface. His book is one of countless to be released in the aftermath of the success of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*,¹ which thrust the issue of economic inequality into the public eye. Frankfurt's book, however, is the opposite of Piketty's in that it is neither a tome nor does he rely in any way on the use of mathematics to make his point. The book is pocket size and written in an accessible way, making it more likely actually to be read by academics and laymen alike.² Frankfurt's book is unusual in two more ways in that it is neither a novel contribution to the debate nor does it side with Piketty's (and many others') claim that economic inequality is the paramount issue facing societies today.

Frankfurt's book is not novel in the sense that the content is largely based on two previous papers written by him on the topic of inequality.³ The titles of the two chapters in the book closely follow the titles of the papers and repeat Frankfurt's case for what he calls the "doctrine of sufficiency" (p. 7). This doctrine denies that economic equality is a moral ideal worthy of aspiration:

¹ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014).

² Research has shown that in the Kindle version of Piketty's book, people generally get to page 26 before they stop reading; see Jordan Ellenberg, "The Summer's Most Unread Book Is . . .," *The Wall Street Journal* (July 3, 2014), accessed online at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-summers-most-unread-book-is-1404417569>.

³ Harry Frankfurt, "Equality as a Moral Ideal," *Ethics* 98, no. 1 (October 1987), pp. 21-43; Harry Frankfurt, "Equality and Respect," *Social Research* 64, no. 1 (Spring 1997), pp. 3-15.

Economic equality is not, as such, of any particular moral importance; and by the same token, economic inequality is not in itself morally objectionable. 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*. If everyone had enough money, it would be of no special or deliberate concern whether some people had more money than others. (p. 7)

The doctrine of sufficiency stands in stark contrast to Piketty's (and others') claim that economic inequality *as such* is a major problem. Although not of any intrinsic value, Frankfurt admits that economic equality may have instrumental value in preventing some of the negative side-effects that vast economic inequality might have. Most prominent amongst these is disproportional influence on political and economic processes.

It is not entirely clear why Frankfurt believes that preventing inequality from having undue influence on the political and economic processes presupposes economic egalitarianism. Few people, if any, would claim that sustaining inequality through inappropriate means is a good thing. It seems that those who are most committed to preventing undue influence on political and economic processes are, in fact, the ones least likely to uphold economically egalitarian values. It is difficult to reconcile belief in the working of the free market, and thus being skeptical of excessive regulation that might be used for partisan interests, with economic egalitarianism.

After making a brief case for economic sufficiency in the first section of Chapter One, Frankfurt discusses and criticizes several defenses of economic equality in the next four sections, most prominently Abba Lerner's defense of economic equality based on the idea of diminishing marginal utility. The last section of the first chapter discusses in some depth the notion of "enough" in Frankfurt's theory. He distinguishes between two possible meanings of "enough":

In the doctrine of sufficiency, the use of the notion of "enough" pertains to meeting a [basic] standard rather than to reaching a limit. To say[, in general,] that a person has enough money means—more or less—that he is content, or that it is reasonable for him to be content, with having no more money than he actually has. (p. 48)

In other words, a situation where someone has “enough” is a situation where someone is “content” with what he has. Frankfurt rightfully notes that there is a difference between the general understanding of having enough money and his more specific sense of “enough” in terms of having *sufficient* money. Having money sufficient to pay the bills every month and buy only basic sustenance hardly seems like a situation in which many people would consider themselves content. Contentment is reached when any problems you have are not due to a lack of money or simply cannot be solved by having more money.

Here, Frankfurt’s notion of “enough” runs into trouble. In making the distinction between enough and sufficient income, he assumes that enough income can only be reached by earning a surplus on top of a sufficient level of income. Being content then necessarily becomes a matter of earning an income above a sufficient level.⁴ Should there be any needs that are left unfulfilled after the standard of enough has been met, then satisfying them is merely an *option* for the person involved. Frankfurt says, “Even if he knows that he could quite possibly obtain even greater satisfaction overall, he does not feel the uneasiness or the ambition that would incline him to seek it” (p. 55). A useful analogy would be the old comparison between the sort of life a surfer wants in order to be content and the sort of life a person with expensive tastes wants to be content.⁵ The surfer wants nothing more than to be able to surf all day and he works just enough to meet his basic financial needs (i.e., paying the rent and utility bills for his small oceanside apartment and basic sustenance). The person with expensive tastes, on the other hand, works a lot more hours than strictly necessary in order to pay for his expensive tastes. The surfer has sufficient money, but it is doubtful whether—on Frankfurt’s view—he has enough money.

This is where a paradox develops in Frankfurt’s theory. On the one hand, it is doubtful that the surfer has enough (according to the idea of enough as a basic standard of income). On the other hand, one reason why Frankfurt rejects economic equality as holding intrinsic value is because equality unduly focuses on comparing oneself to

⁴ Frankfurt does not put a number on the amount of money an average person would need in order to be content, but it’s safe to assume that it would be a bit more than just an average net salary.

⁵ Philippe Van Parijs, “Why Surfers Should Be Fed: The Liberal Case for an Unconditional Basic Income,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 20 (1991), pp. 101-31.

others and thereby distorts the true desires and needs you have: “Exaggerating the moral importance of economic equality is harmful, in other words, because it is *alienating*. It separates a person from his own individual reality, and leads him to focus his attention upon desires and needs that are not most authentically his own” (p. 12). Frankfurt thus claims that the amount of money you need to be content should be seen as independent of how much money others have, yet adhering to this principle would mean that the doctrine of sufficiency becomes void. Either we recognize each individual as holding distinct preferences and tastes which can be met by any level of monetary income large enough to satisfy him or we set an (arbitrary) standard of personal income that is enough rather than just sufficient and which forces individuals falling below this standard to sacrifice some of their time in exchange for money (i.e., the satisfaction of further needs would not be an option but mandatory). Ironically enough, choosing the second option, as implied by the doctrine of sufficiency, entails comparing incomes between individuals.

In the second chapter of the book, Frankfurt broadens the scope to include other kinds of inequality. As was the case with economic inequality, he also outright rejects the moral significance of these inequalities, saying: “In addition to equality of resources and equality of welfare, several other modes of equality may be distinguished: equality of opportunity, equal respect, equal rights, equal consideration, equal concern, and so on. My view is that none of these modes of equality is intrinsically valuable” (p. 68). Frankfurt argues by way of analogy: Just as it is irrelevant to judge someone’s individual economic situation by comparing it to someone else’s, it is also irrelevant to judge other aspects of his situation by comparing it to the situation of others: “Every person should be accorded the rights, the respect, the considerations, and the concern to which he is entitled by virtue of what he is and what he has done. The extent of his entitlement to them does not depend on whether or not other people are entitled to them as well” (p. 75). It’s easy to see why people feel badly when they see two radically different lives played out in front of their eyes, but moral condemnation of inequality loses a lot of its sting when it is pointed out that despite the enormous difference between the person who is incredibly well-off and the person who is less well-off, the person less well-off might still be doing fairly well. Frankfurt is right to keep on repeating that what we find upsetting is the situation of those truly suffering rather than that of a person who might not be as wealthy, as well respected, or have as many opportunities as a wealthy

person but who might still have enough to realize most of his individual needs and preferences.

Lastly, Frankfurt discusses the difference between treating people equally and treating them with respect, for he holds that the inability to differentiate between the two has contributed significantly to the moral appeal of egalitarianism. Whereas equality is concerned with impersonally levelling outcomes, respect takes into account information about those involved to decide on a suitable distribution. It's easy enough to see how respectful treatment might lead to different distributional outcomes. Ordinarily speaking, if some details of a situation are known, that will lead to diverging outcomes that pay suitable respect to the different individuals involved. Consider group publications in academia. Although each person mentioned as an author contributed to the research project, this does not automatically mean that all of them have an equal claim to be listed as primary authors. Some instigated the work or contributed disproportionately more than others. This will have different distributional outcomes because of the importance given to authorship of publications in making decisions about awarding tenure to academics. Primary authorship will carry more weight than secondary authorship.

What becomes interesting is when lack of information precludes an unequal distribution amongst a group of people. Here, Frankfurt cites an example given by Isaiah Berlin:

The assumption is that equality needs no reasons, only inequality does so. . . . If I have a cake and there are ten persons among whom I wish to divide it, then if I give exactly one tenth to each, this will not, at any rate automatically, call for justification; whereas if I depart from this principle of equal division, I am expected to produce a special reason. (p. 80)⁶

In contrast to Berlin, who assumes that equality is the default position, Frankfurt argues that in this case equality is in fact the right choice, but only because equality and respect coincide due to the *lack* of information. Dividing the cake unequally would be unfair because there is no reason to assume that some people can lay claim to more than the share they would receive under an equal distribution. The

⁶ Isaiah Berlin, "Equality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1955-1956), pp. 281-326; quotation at p. 305.

equal distribution does not disrespect anyone, because it is not known whether they merit more than what they are currently getting. Although the equal distribution might be labeled respectful from the point of view of the person doing the distributing, individuals might feel disrespected due to the fact that they know their own situation and believe that they deserve more cake. At birthday parties, for example, it would be considered disrespectful to give everybody an equal amount of cake, when the person whose birthday it is knows that he or she deserves more cake on that specific day.

Frankfurt implicitly assumes that this is not a problem; dividing the cake equally is the only logical solution when no relevant information is available. Unequal distribution becomes the default option only when information is available. Upon closer inspection, however, this might not always be the case.

According to Frankfurt's reasoning, there are two possible distributions:

- (1) No information is available, so divide the cake equally amongst all the people.⁷
- (2) Information is available that shows different levels of merit, so divide the cake unequally.

Intuitively, (2) seems like a clear-cut case. Why would anyone deny someone's merit and disrespect them by giving them as much as everyone else, when it is clear that they deserve more? Frankfurt states this point well: "There is a sense in which being guided by what is relevant—thus treating similar cases alike and relevantly unlike cases differently—is an elementary aspect of being rational" (p. 84). However, is an equal distribution necessarily irrational even in cases where information concerning merit is available? Frankfurt seems to think so, although he denies that irrationality itself is necessarily immoral. One might argue that even with the existence of information that could prove an individual's superior merit, and thus claim to a larger piece of the cake, it would still be rational to distribute equally. The computational limits of the human mind might make it implausible to take into account all information about everyone's possible merit, especially since real-life situations will often involve a significant

⁷ I will not discuss cases in which there might be information about the people involved but the information shows that each of them has equal merit and thus should get an equal share.

number of people and not just ten (as in the example). Herbert Simon has made the case that the most rational thing to do in circumstances such as this, is to use the strategy of “satisficing” to get to a situation that is “good enough” rather than optimal.⁸ Akin to the concept of “enough” discussed above, satisficing is about reaching a threshold and not a limit. It seems at least plausible that an equal distribution represents the most rational threshold given cognitive limitations.

On Inequality is elegantly written by one of the foremost philosophers of our time and provides a surprising amount of insight for such a brief book. Despite its accessibility and brevity, it is unlikely that it will have a significant impact on discussions on inequality, since it largely replicates previous work done by Frankfurt. Had more effort been put into updating and expanding the content, the book would stand out much more in the post-Piketty era.

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⁸ Herbert Simon, “Rational Choice and the Structure of the Environment,” *Psychological Review* 63, no. 2 (1956), pp. 129-38, esp. p. 129.

