

Why Equality Is a Flawed Moral Idea: A Review of “On Inequality” by Harry Frankfurt

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“From the point of view of morality, it is not important that everyone should have *the same*. What is important is that each should have *enough*” (Frankfurt 2015, 7). This is the key message Harry Frankfurt, professor emeritus at Princeton, and renowned philosopher, aims to convey in his book *On Inequality* (Frankfurt 2015). Especially after the publication of Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Piketty and Goldhammer 2014), the issue of inequality has in many ways come to the top of the agenda of many political movements.

How to write about inequality without a single mention of the atrocities of communism and failures of socialism? For better or worse, the book rarely touches upon the real world – in fact, the only allusion to our increasingly complex reality refers to inflation as a potential aftermath of redistributive economic policies. In so doing, Frankfurt does not adopt or advocate partisan views. Instead, he is concerned with the pursuit of truth and does not endorse any policies that would make his vision of the ideal society come true. As he writes, “... nothing I shall say concerning these issues implies anything of substance as to the kinds of social or political policies it may be desirable to pursue or to avoid” (Frankfurt 2015, 65).

On Inequality, rather than engaging in polarising political and economic debates, clearly articulates the flaws of the egalitarian paradigm on a philosophical level. Easy-to-read and just over one hundred pages long, *On Inequality* is a great read for everyone interested in political and economic philosophy. However, the general public might find it difficult to follow, since the author assumes that his readers are familiar with some of the philosophical concepts he explores, such as diminishing marginal utility.

Frankfurt’s main argument is simple: the “defining challenge of our time” (Frankfurt 2015, 3) is not that society is unequal, but rather that too many people remain poor. The first chapter of the book is dedicated to the author’s main argument that economic equality itself is not a morally compelling ideal. After all, “[t]he fact that some people have much less than others is not at all morally disturbing when it is clear that the worse off have plenty” (Frankfurt 2015, 43). Instead, he proposes the so-called doctrine of sufficiency, asserting that society’s primary aim should be to ensure that everyone has enough resources to be content with his life.

Nevertheless, Frankfurt considers that, in spite of the fact that we should not strive to achieve equality, egalitarian economic policies might be useful in the achievement of other valuable societal goals. In the words of the author, “[t]hat economic equality is not a good in itself leaves open the possibility, obviously, that it may be instrumentally valuable as a

necessary condition for the attainment of goods that do genuinely possess intrinsic value” (Frankfurt 2015, 9).

Based on the utilitarian concept of diminishing marginal utility, one might then argue that redistributionist policies are desirable to increase people’s happiness via monetary means. According to this concept, the more you have of something, the less valuable it becomes. Thus, supporters of this theory argue that redistributing money from the rich to the poor would maximise aggregate utility, because the rich would have little to lose, while the poor would gain a lot in terms of utility. Without touching directly upon the usefulness of redistributionist policies, Frankfurt, however, maintains that diminishing marginal utility is a flawed concept for three reasons. Firstly, while redistributing money will make the poor richer, it would also drive up their consumption and overall demand, leading to an increase in prices (Frankfurt 2015, 19). In this scenario, the middle class will constitute the biggest loser due to higher inflation – and the rise in the utility among the poor may be offset by the reduction in the level of life quality among the middle class. Secondly, “[it] is quite possible that money [is] exempt from the phenomenon of unrelenting marginal decline, because of its limitless versatility” (Frankfurt 2015, 22). If you have so many cars that buying an additional one does not make you considerably happier, then you can spend your money to buy a yacht, which will increase your utility. Thirdly, there are goods whose utility, instead of declining, rises over time. For instance, a painting that completes a collection of paintings will provide a higher degree of utility than the previous ones.

Reinforcing Frankfurt’s arguments against diminishing marginal utility, Jonathan Haidt (2012) has identified six fundamental human values: fairness, liberty, hierarchy, care, loyalty, and sanctity. Since giving more money to the poor will only satisfy two of these values – care and fairness – and overlook all other aspects of human nature, it remains doubtful that this strategy will result in a greater level of satisfaction with life.

Another reason why the focus on inequality proves undesirable is that inequality is a construct reflecting the differences in incomes, but omitting how large these incomes are and whether or not this discrepancy negatively affects people’s well-being. As Frankfurt himself has pointed out, “[s]urely what is of genuine moral concern is not formal but substantive. It is whether people have good lives, and not how their lives compare with the lives of others.” (Frankfurt 2015, 71). After all, the moral importance of one person being richer than the other has been made up by humans: According to the research by sociologists Jonathan Kelley and Mariah Evans, who found that the theory of inequality causing unhappiness “comes to shipwreck on the rock of the facts”, in the words of Harvard professor Steven

Pinker (Pinker 2018, 101). In developed countries, the researchers showed, inequality has no effect on the level of happiness of their citizens, while in developing states, inequality even makes people happier. In the end, poor people suffer because they do not have enough, not because others have more (Kelly and Evans 2017).

Frankfurt reasons that not only the obsession over equality is misguided, but that problems also appear as a result of the inordinate attention people pay to the issue of inequality. When people are driven by the mistaken assumption that equality is morally important,

... their readiness to be satisfied with some particular level of income or wealth is ... not guided by their own most distinctive interests and ambitions. Instead, it is just guided by the quantity of money that other people happen to have... Thus a preoccupation with the alleged inherent value of economic equality tends to divert a person's attention away from trying to discover – within his experience of himself and of his life conditions – what he himself cares about, what he truly desires or needs, and what will actually satisfy him (Frankfurt 2015, 10-11).

Put another way, when a person focuses on how his income compares to that of others, he is essentially letting others' standards shape his needs and wants, failing to grasp his own unique needs and preferences, surrendering his peculiar being and individual vitality to some commonality. And as Frankfurt writes, "... the doctrine of equality contributes to the moral disorientation and shallowness of our time" (Frankfurt 2015, 14). Furthermore, a blind focus on inequality diverts public intellectuals' attention from other issues in need of address. For instance, eliminating poverty would render dramatic income redistributions unnecessary, as society as a whole would be richer and more prosperous. We should tackle, according to Harry Frankfurt, not "a relative quantitative discrepancy but an absolute qualitative deficiency" (Frankfurt 2015, 41).

In the second, and the last, chapter of his book, Frankfurt first discusses the moral acceptability of "radical initial discrepancies in life prospects" (Frankfurt 2015, 69), or inequality of opportunity. He contends that, if we assume that "the prospects of those whose life prospects are "radically inferior" are in fact rather good" (Frankfurt 2015, 70), then we should not worry about this kind of inequality.

Lastly, Frankfurt points out that it is important to treat people with respect, that is, aim "at outcomes matched specifically to the particularities of the individual" (Frankfurt 2015, 78). Frankfurt argues we should treat people respectfully and impartially rather than equally because "[w]hat most fundamentally dictates that all human beings must be accorded the same entitlements is the presumed moral importance of responding impartially to

common humanity, and not any alleged moral importance of equality as an independently compelling goal” (Frankfurt 2015, 84).

Frankfurt’s book provides a compelling argument against equality. His criticism of the concept of diminishing marginal utility as well as of contemporary intellectuals’ flawed understanding of their own nature are fresh and persuasive. However, *On Inequality* is to a certain degree detached from the realities of today’s political environment; the book provides more of a case against the negative perception of inequality *per se* rather than a discussion on the morality of redistributing wealth to eliminate poverty and implement more generous social programs, which is a more contentious issue nowadays. To sum up, although Frankfurt’s book is intellectually rigorous, insightful, well-reasoned, and of philosophical and academic importance, it does not considerably alter today’s political debates on the issue of inequality.

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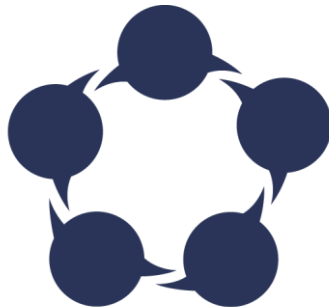
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