

Harry Frankfurt, *On Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 102 pp. & xi. \$14.95 hardcover.¹

Harry Frankfurt's *On Inequality* juxtaposes two previously published essays: "Equality as a Moral Ideal"² – reprinted here as "Economic Equality as a Moral Ideal" – and "Equality and Respect."³ Both essays argue against the view that equality and inequality have inherent moral significance. Both argue for the view that what really matters is not everyone's having the same resources or advantages, but everyone's having enough of them to lead a life which is satisfying by her own lights.

- I -

The two essays that make up *Inequality* have been very lightly revised for republication. Indeed, they have been so lightly revised that they take almost no account of the vast outpouring of literature on equality that has appeared since Frankfurt first published them, referring at one point to an article published in 1985 as "recent" (p. 95, note 4). This is unfortunate because readers who are familiar with that literature will often find themselves wondering how Frankfurt would have responded to points advanced in it, including to criticisms of the sufficientarianism he defends in these essays. But Frankfurt's failure to engage the bulk of this literature, while regrettable, is also understandable, his interest in equality is very different from that of most of the philosophers and economists who have written about it. This difference can be brought out by showing how deeply the critical arguments of Frankfurt's essays are rooted in the philosophical concerns that have long nourished his work. Frankfurt did not use the occasion of republication to draw those connections himself. I shall do so both because those connections give Frankfurt's critiques of equality their novelty and interest, and because drawing them brings to light his critiques' greatest weakness. Because what Frankfurt calls his "doctrine of sufficiency" has been subject to searching examination by other readers,⁴ I shall ignore it in what follows and will concentrate instead on his critical treatments of equality and inequality.

I refer to Frankfurt's "critical treatments" and "critiques" in the plural not only because he offers a number of critical arguments but also because those arguments are directed against different forms of equality and inequality. The first essay in *On Inequality* is – as its new title suggests -- concerned with specifically equality of income and wealth, while the second is directed against egalitarianism of all kinds. Frankfurt expresses the conclusions of those arguments by saying variously that the kind of equality in view "is not, as such, of any particular moral importance" (p. 7), that it is not "an ideal of any intrinsic moral importance." (p. 65), that the correlative kind of inequality is "inherent[ly] moral[ly] innocen[t]" (p. xi) and that such inequality "is not in itself morally objectionable" (p. 7). These passages read like claims about intrinsic moral value. They are the claims Frankfurt tries to establish. And though Frankfurt is at pains to say that he supports "many ... efforts" "to eliminate or ameliorate" "prevailing inequalities" (p. 66), they are the claims that have garnered his book the praise of conservatives.⁵

These claims about intrinsic value are not, however, the claims Frankfurt ultimately wants to assert. Rather, he tries to establish them because he takes the denial of equality's intrinsic value to ground the further claim that various forms of equality should not be taken as final ends, pursued for their own sake. Some evidence of this is his remark that "appreciating the inherent moral innocence of economic inequality ... facilitates recognition of why it may actually be harmful to regard economic inequality as being, in itself, *a morally important goal*." (p. xi, emphasis added) Further evidence is his denial that he supports measures to ameliorate inequality because he thinks "equality

¹ I am grateful to Dustin Crummett for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this review.

² Harry Frankfurt, "Equality as a Moral Ideal", *Ethics* 98,1 (1987): 21-43.

³ Harry Frankfurt, "Equality and Respect", *Social Research* 64,1(1997): 3-15.

⁴ Richard Arneson, "Why Justice Requires Transfers to Offset Income and Wealth Inequalities", in Paul, Miller and Paul eds., *Should Differences in Income and Wealth Matter?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 172-200.

⁵ See, for example, George F. Will, "What Bernie Sanders Doesn't Understand about Economic Equality," https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/economic-inequality-and-freedom/2015/10/16/db256346-7396-11e5-9cbb-790369643cf9_story.html (accessed January 3, 2016).

of some kind is morally desirable for its own sake and that *certain egalitarian goals are therefore inherently worthy.*" (p. 66, emphases added)⁶

Unfortunately, the claim about final ends is not one Frankfurt's arguments actually support. For as I read his central arguments in this book, they proceed by trying to show that our deliberations about the conduct of our own lives go badly – by failing to track what is of genuine moral importance – if we give economic equality, or equality of some other kind, a guiding or governing role in those deliberations. And so the conclusion these arguments support, if they are successful, is that equality should not be given that role. But as shall argue below, this does not imply that equality is not of inherent moral significance. Nor does it imply that equality should not be treated as a final end in *any* practical reasoning whatever. I shall defend my reading of Frankfurt's argument shortly. But first I want to consider his contention that *theoretical* reasoning in some domains will also go astray if economic equality is taken to be inherently valuable or an end in itself.

- II -

"The prevalence of egalitarian thinking," Frankfurt says, "diverts the attention of intellectuals" from the difficult problems entailed by elaborating a theory of sufficiency. (p. 14) It does so, he claims, because egalitarian thinking – at least once prevalent – seduces philosophers and economists with its relative conceptual clarity and arithmetic ease. (See pp. 14-15)

One problem with this line of thought is that Frankfurt greatly underestimates the difficulty of articulating a theory of equality. Perhaps he does so – and here I only speculate -- because he does not distinguish the task of telling how much a given income deviates from an equal share of total income from that of telling how far a given income *distribution* deviates from an equal distribution. The latter task – crucial to the articulation of a theory of economic equality -- is one of considerable complexity and requires fairly sophisticated mathematics.⁷ Indeed, my impression is that the development of data sets needed for the longitudinal study of income inequality is itself a more significant accomplishment than Frankfurt seems to appreciate.⁸

Another problem is that it is doubtful economists who study economic inequality actually treat equality as a final end. It is true that they are often not as forthcoming as they might be about what is wrong with inequality,⁹ and their silence on the matter may suggest that they think economic inequality is bad in and of itself. But some of the classic papers on the measurement of inequality explicitly assume that inequality matters because of its effects on welfare.¹⁰ The authors of those papers may be mistaken about just how inequality affects total welfare, since they make an assumption which Frankfurt very effectively refutes – namely, that the utility individuals derive from each additional unit of money decreases once some threshold of income and wealth has been achieved.¹¹ (pp. 17-40) But even if these economists are mistaken about the diminishing marginal utility of money, and so about the positive effect on total welfare of reductions in inequality, they do not take economic equality as an end in itself.

⁶ The move from a claim about intrinsic values to one about final ends is itself controversial; see Christine M. Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness", *The Philosophical Review* 92,2 (1983): 169-95.

⁷ For a useful introduction, see Julie A. Litchfield, "Inequality: Methods and Tools", <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPGI/Resources/Inequality/litchfie.pdf> (accessed December 26, 2015).

⁸ See Thomas Piketty and Emanuel Saez, "Income Inequality in the United States, 1913-1998", *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118,1 (2003): 1-39.

⁹ I have discussed one case of this in "Piketty and the Pope: A Dialogue Begun", *Theological Studies* 76,3 (2015): 572-95.

¹⁰ Here I have in mind Hugh Dalton, "The Measurement of Inequality of Income," *The Economic Journal*, 30 (1920): 348-361, p. 348 and Anthony Atkinson, "On the Measurement of Inequality", *Journal of Economic Theory* 2 (1970): 244-263.

¹¹ See Dalton, "Measurement of Inequality of Income", p. 349.

Indeed, it is not clear that anyone actually holds the theses against which the critical arguments of Frankfurt's first essay are directed.

Frankfurt says that "many people believe that economic equality has, in itself, considerable moral value" (p. 6) but he cites only Thomas Nagel as believing it (p. 94, note 3). As Derek Parfit pointed out in a discussion of the essay of Nagel's that Frankfurt cites, Nagel does not actually defend economic equality as intrinsically valuable. He commends it because of its effects.¹² So the one philosopher whom Frankfurt identifies as endorsing his target thesis seems not to do so. It is true that Parfit has identified "telic egalitarianism" among the positions defended in the philosophical literature on equality, and telic egalitarians do believe that inequality is bad in itself. But the inequality they take to be bad in itself is inequality of welfare, not inequality of income and wealth,¹³ so these philosophers' defense of telic egalitarianism does not show that anyone holds Frankfurt's target thesis either.

Nor do "the prevalence of egalitarian [talk]" in American politics, and the fact that many in the electorate respond positively to it, show that American politicians and voters think economic inequality is inherently objectionable.¹⁴ Another possible explanation of the phenomena is that the journalists, politicians and intellectuals who cite common indicators of economic inequality – such as the percentage of wealth controlled by the top .1%,¹⁵ the percentage of economic growth since 2008 that has been captured by the top 1%¹⁶ and the ratio of CEO compensation to that of front-line workers¹⁷ – do so on the assumption that members of the public will complete the inference, recognizing these inequalities for what they are. That is, they cite the indicators assuming that the public will recognize them as the causes, effects and symptoms of something that really *is* inherently objectionable: an economy and a political system that are unfair because they work together for the benefit of the few while leaving many with barely enough to get by.

- III -

Of course it may be that the "prevalence of egalitarian thinking" in American politics *will* move people to conclude that economic equality is inherently valuable or that its prevalence *does* reflect the fact that people have already reached that conclusion. As I have said, Frankfurt repeatedly contends that that conclusion is mistaken. Establishing the contention – and, what I have said Frankfurt takes as a corollary, that no form of equality should be treated as a final end -- is the aim of his book. But as I also said, Frankfurt's central arguments do not support these contentions. What they support, if successful, is the very different and much weaker contention that various kinds of equality should not be treated as important final ends in the deliberations each of us conducts about his or her own life.

Frankfurt himself provides some crucial pieces of evidence for this reading of his arguments. For at one point, he expresses the conclusion of the first essay by saying that "it is misguided to endorse economic egalitarianism as an authentic *moral ideal*" (p. xi, emphasis added). He expresses the conclusion of the second by saying "I categorically reject the presumption that egalitarianism, of whatever variety, is *an ideal* of any intrinsic moral importance" (p. 65,

¹² Derek Parfit, "Equality or Priority?" in Clayton and Williams, eds., *The Ideal of Equality* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), pp. 81-125, see pp. 86-7.

¹³ Parfit, "Equality or Priority?", p. 84.

¹⁴ As Frankfurt seems to suggest they do when he contrasts his view with a line from one of Barack Obama's State of the Union addresses on p. 3.

¹⁵ Peter Coy, "The Richest Rich are in a Class by Themselves", <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2014-04-03/top-tenth-of-1-percenters-reaps-all-the-riches> (accessed December 27, 2015)

¹⁶ Justin Wolfers, "The Gains from the Economic Recovery are Still Limited to the Top 1%", <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/28/upshot/gains-from-economic-recovery-still-limited-to-top-one-percent.html> (accessed December 27, 2015)

¹⁷ See the figures available at <http://www.payscale.com/data-packages/ceo-income> (accessed December 27, 2015)

emphasis added). It is easy to overlook the phrases ‘ideal’ and ‘moral ideal,’ or to suppose that Frankfurt uses them casually. In fact, the word ‘ideal’ is something of a technical term for him and we can begin to see how Frankfurt’s central argument goes by attending to what it means to him.

In “On the Importance of What We Care About”, Frankfurt says that committing to something as an ideal entails “pursuing it [with] preemptive attention and concern.”¹⁸ I interpret this to mean, roughly, that when we take something as an ideal, our pursuit of it prevents our taking a practical interest in some things that we might otherwise have found attractive, and that at least some of our other non-trivial endeavors are scheduled around our attempts to realize our ideal. I therefore interpret the Frankfurt of “What We Care About” to be saying, even more roughly, that when we take something as an ideal, we take it as an especially important member of our set of final ends. And so – assuming consistency of usage -- I read the Frankfurt of *On Inequality* as arguing that it is a mistake to treat economic equality, or other kinds of equality, as such an end. But what does he think would be problematic about doing that?

The primary argument Frankfurt offers against treating economic equality as an ideal is a variant of the main argument of the second essay. The argument-form Frankfurt relies on in the two essays can be elaborated by drawing on another important essay of Frankfurt’s.

In “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person”, Frankfurt famously argued that to be a person is to be capable of reflecting on one’s desires and of identifying with some of them.¹⁹ To identify with a desire is, he thinks, to affirm that one wants to be moved by it. And so to live as a person is to affirm that one wants to be moved by some of one’s desires. That, he thinks, is what it is to exercise one’s distinctively personal capacities. Suppose Frankfurt also thinks that it is of fundamental moral importance that we exercise those capacities well, and that we exercise them well only if we affirm that we want to be moved by desires that are authentically our own. In *On Inequality*, Frankfurt says desires that are authentically our own are desires “that derive from the character of [our] own lives, and not those that imposed on [us] by the conditions in which others happen to live.” (p. 89) So I am supposing Frankfurt thinks it is fundamentally morally important that when we reflect on our desires and ask which ones we want to be moved by, we affirm that what we want is to be moved by desires which are so derived.

As we have seen, Frankfurt thinks that to take equality as a moral ideal would be to treat it as a final end – and, indeed, as an important one to which other, non-trivial ends are subordinate. Now suppose he also thinks that to accord equality that kind of authority over our lives – the kind of authority our important final ends have for us -- is, in part, to give it authority over the persons we decide to be. It is to give equality authority when we decide which desires we want to be moved by. Giving it that authority implies that we will, for instance, identify with -- and decide that we want to be moved by -- the desire to have as much money as those whose income currently exceeds ours, and that we will acquiesce in our dissatisfaction with having less than they do. More generally, it implies that if we take some kind of equality as an ideal, and therefore “pursu[e] it [with] preemptive attention and concern”, we will be prevented from identifying with desires that are authentically ours. Equality prevents us from identifying with such desires because it directs our gaze to others and forces us to measure our lives by “the conditions in which *they* happen to live”.

Thus if we suppose Frankfurt thinks that to treat equality as an ideal is to give it an authoritative role in our deliberations about which desires we want to be moved by, we can see why he says that taking equality of any kind as a moral ideal “is ...an impediment to the identification of what is truly of fundamental moral and social worth.” (p. 89) We can also see why he thinks that “exaggerating the moral importance of economic equality” – by taking it as a moral ideal – “is harmful ... because it is *alienating*.” (p. 12) That we can see this tells, I believe, in favor of my reading of Frankfurt’s central argument.

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¹⁸ Harry Frankfurt, “On the Importance of What We Care About”, *Synthese* 53,2 (1982): 252-72, p. 258.

¹⁹ Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 68,1 (1971): 5-21.

If I am right about how Frankfurt's argument goes, then it needs some qualification. The argument depends upon a contrast between desires that are authentic because they "derive from the character of [our] own lives" and those that are inauthentic because they are "imposed on [us]" by the conditions of others. While it is not clear how the conditions of others can "impose" desires upon us, I take it Frankfurt means to contrast the desires he takes to be authentic with those that arise when we compare our condition with others. Rousseau famously worried that we live inauthentically when we live *in* the eyes of others. Frankfurt, we might say, worries that we live inauthentically when we live with an eye *on* others.

The problem is that not all desires which arise from interpersonal comparison threaten our authenticity, nor do we necessarily live inauthentically if we identify with the desire to equal or better others. Surely the desire to be as good a golfer as the best who came before me, or the desire to be the greatest living violinist, can be authentically my own. Even desires that depend upon economic comparisons are not obviously inauthentic, since I could – it seems to me – authentically desire to be the richest hedge fund manager in New York.

Frankfurt might respond that if this last desire is authentic, it is because wealth is a sign of ability in the world of finance, so that what I really want when I want to be the richest hedge fund manager is to be the best one. That desire, like my desire for parity with the greatest golfer or for superiority to other violinists, is most charitably understood as a desire to develop my skills to a limit which can only be ascertained comparatively. Desires of this kind can be authentic, Frankfurt may say, but they are to be contrasted with the desire simply to occupy a given spot in a rank-ordering, just as such. The problem with desires of the latter kind can be seen by taking someone who has a level of income she regards as satisfactory and imagining that incomes of anyone who makes less than she are raised so that her income now ranks lowest. If her purchasing power is unaffected, her previous satisfaction with her income should be unaffected as well. If it *is* affected then, Frankfurt might say, there *is* something inauthentic about her values and something alienated about her life.

This line of thought may help Frankfurt sustain the claim that there is something problematic about taking economic equality, just as such, as a moral ideal. The second essay's claim that there is something problematic about taking other kinds of equality as moral ideals would, I believe, be harder to sustain because examples of a person who takes them as such would tell less decisively against doing so. But it is the argument of the second essay that seems to be the more sweeping and threatening. For even if the argument of the first essay succeeds in showing that economic equality should not be taken as a final end, Frankfurt grants that economic equality might still be pursued as a means to realizing some further end. (pp. ix-x) Egalitarians have often thought that that further end is some other kind of equality, such as equality of opportunity, political equality or social equality.²⁰ If the argument of the second essay succeeds in establishing that these forms of equality should not be treated as moral ideals either, then many of the traditional reasons for reducing economic equality would seem to be evacuated of their force. The argument of Frankfurt's second essay therefore seems to pose a significant threat to progressive political theorizing.

- V -

But does it? Grant that Frankfurt succeeds in showing that it is alienating and superficial for me to pursue any kind of equality "with preemptive attention and concern", and that I should instead try to discern "[my] own most authentic needs, interests and ambitions". (p. 12) This would be an important point, one which Frankfurt reaches by following his distinctive philosophical interests where they lead. But it does not prove what Frankfurt takes it to.

From the fact that it would be alienating and superficial for me to treat something as a final end does not obviously imply that the thing lacks intrinsic value. William Frankena thought the experience of acting virtuously and the experience of achievement were plausible candidates for bearers of intrinsic value.²¹ I think another plausible candidate is the expression of gratitude for benefits conferred. But I also think that it would be superficial and self-defeating for me to pursue the experiences of virtue and achievement as ends in themselves, since those experiences are worth having only if they are engendered by my attainment ends I should seek for their own sakes: virtuous

²⁰ See T.M. Scanlon, "The Diversity of Objections to Inequality", *The Lindley Lecture, 1996*, p. 3, available at <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/12409/The%20Diversity%20of%20Objections%20to%20Inequality-1996.pdf?sequence=1> (accessed December 28, 2015).

²¹ William Frankena, *Ethics*, chapter 5, available at <http://www.ditext.com/frankena/e5.html> (accessed January 4, 2016)

action and excellence in my chosen endeavors. I also think it would be at best superficial to treat expressions of gratitude as final ends by, for example, conferring benefits on my loved ones in order to receive them.

Nor does Frankfurt's central argument establish the further conclusion that I have said he wants to draw and that would threaten progressive political theory – namely, that equality is not a value which social conditions should realize, just for its own sake. To see this, note first that the needs, interests and ambitions with which I ultimately identify will be affected by the social and political conditions that prevail in my world. The question of whether my plan of life has been framed under the right conditions is surely a question of great moral importance. That question is not important because preferences and plans adopted in response to unjust conditions are *ipso facto* inauthentic. For they surely are not. John Hope Franklin's commitment to documenting the history of American racism was authentic even though it was made in response to social conditions of grave injustice.²² Despite the authenticity of Franklin's plan of life, we can still recognize that it would have been better had there been no racism for him to have been a historian of. Rather, the question is important precisely because social conditions do so much to shape the persons we decide to be.

Frankfurt's arguments do not have any implications for how that question should be answered. If successful, they would establish that individuals deliberating about what they want and need risk alienation if they concern themselves with whether equality is realized in certain ways – with, for instance, whether they are the social equals of others or are receiving the share of income and wealth that equality requires. But rather than showing that our social world need not satisfy the demands of equality, this might just be taken to show that we deliberate best about the conduct of our own lives and the sufficiency of our resources when we are secure in the knowledge that those demands are satisfied. We could therefore accept Frankfurt's arguments, while taking issue with his denial that “egalitarian goals are ... inherently worthy”.

Rawls recognized that there are problems of justice which should be left to the basic structure so that individuals need not consider them in daily life. Frankfurt's arguments might be taken to establish the same conclusion.²³ If this is really what Frankfurt's arguments show, then they suggest the need for a division of deliberative labor. On one side of the division, the side Frankfurt discusses in this book and in much of his other work, we exercise our powers of personality by identifying with desires and plans which are authentically our own. On the other side of the division, we need to exercise our powers of practical reason to identify and implement the social and political demands of relevant kinds of equality, so that deliberations of the first kind take place under just conditions. I cannot pursue the questions of what the relevant kind of equality is or what its demands are. What matters for present purposes is this. If Frankfurt's arguments are sound, they do not threaten egalitarian theorizing. Instead, they help us to see why it is needed.

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²² John Hope Franklin, “The Charles Homer Haskins Lecture for 1988: A Life of Learning” at https://www.acls.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/OP/Haskins/1988_JohnHopeFranklin.pdf (accessed December 29, 2015)

²³ Somewhat more precisely: Rawls thinks that secure knowledge of background justice enables members of his well-ordered society to go about their business without worrying about whether *others* are receiving the appropriate distributive shares rather than about whether they themselves are; see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 76. Frankfurt's arguments thus suggests a point which complements Rawls's.