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CRITICAL NOTICE

Egalitarians, sufficientarians, and mathematicians: a critical notice of Harry Frankfurt's *On Inequality*

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ABSTRACT

This critical notice provides an overview of Harry Frankfurt's *On Inequality* and assesses whether Frankfurt is right to argue that equality is merely formal and empty. I counter-argue that egalitarianism, properly tweaked and circumscribed, can be defended against Frankfurt's repudiation. After surveying the main arguments in Frankfurt's book, I argue that whatever plausibility the 'doctrine of sufficiency' defended by Frankfurt may have, it does not strike a fatal blow against egalitarianism. There is nothing in egalitarianism that forbids acceptance of the moral platitude expressed in sufficientarianism's positive thesis, (*viz.*, it is morally important that everyone have enough). Nor is there anything in egalitarianism as such that makes it impossible to recognize the banal truth that there are many important things besides equality, and that many dimensions of human affairs are improperly appraised from a relational or comparative point of view. The fact that a relational or comparative point of view is sometimes out of place, however, surely does not mean that it always is. I conclude with the suggestion that egalitarianism is most compelling when it is understood as a normative conception of social relations (rather than, as Frankfurt seems to assume throughout his book, a thesis about the equal distribution of something) and thus presides over precisely those aspects of human affairs for which that relational or comparative point of view is germane.

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Despite its tiny size, Harry Frankfurt's *On Inequality* packs a formidable philosophical punch. The book is divided into two parts. In part I – 'Economic Equality as a Moral Ideal' – Frankfurt argues that economic equality turns out to be no moral ideal at all. Economic inequality is not objectionable as such, he claims. Rather, the proper locus of our moral concern is captured by what Frankfurt dubs 'The doctrine of sufficiency.' It is not important that everyone have the same

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amount of income or wealth. 'What is morally important is that each should have enough.' (Frankfurt 2015, 7) The second part of the book – 'Equality and Respect' – explores the moral importance of respect, and attempts to show that egalitarianism of whatever variety – not only the 'economic egalitarianism' disavowed in part I – is in itself morally insignificant.¹

This little book is a model for how to write philosophy. No one familiar with Frankfurt's philosophical writing will be surprised to hear that the arguments in *On Inequality* are set forth with admirable concision and clarity, and that the prose is sharp and elegant throughout. In what follows, I give an overview of the main arguments in Frankfurt's book, examining them with and against the background of other challenges to egalitarianism launched from 'sufficientarian' and 'prioritarian' perspectives.² One ambition is to clarify commonalities, highlight differences, and locate points of overlap among these views. A more significant ambition is to assess whether Frankfurt's arguments succeed in showing that, contrary to popular rhetoric, equality is merely formal and empty. Departing from the crucial (yet insignificantly appreciated) insight that principles of sufficiency, equality, and priority are not mutually exclusive, and that they are capable of being 'combined in hybrid views,' (Casal 2007, 299) I also want to argue that egalitarianism, properly tweaked and circumscribed, can withstand Frankfurt's repudiation. I conclude with some scattered thoughts about the comparative merits of 'relational' vs. 'distributive' conceptions of equality, and with some broad reflections on the brand of conceptual analysis in moral and political philosophy of which Frankfurt's book is a prominent example.

1. The moral importance of sufficiency and the emptiness of equality

Sufficientarianism is the view that priority should be placed on benefitting those who are not sufficiently well off. This formulation is ambiguous, however, between a *positive* thesis, which maintains that it is important that everyone have enough, and a *negative* one, which denies that equality or priority have any role to play beyond some critical threshold of well-being.³ Needless to say, only the negative thesis poses a direct challenge for egalitarianism. For egalitarians may – and almost unanimously do – agree both that it is bad if there are people who are insufficiently well off, and also that, all else being equal, priority should be placed on benefitting them.

The first part of *On Inequality* gives as clear and powerful an argument for the negative thesis as one is likely to find. Frankfurt's 'doctrine of sufficiency' sets itself against the view he labels 'economic egalitarianism,' the view that 'it is desirable for everyone to have the same amounts of income and of wealth (for short, "money").' (Frankfurt 2015, 6) Suppose you have millions of dollars – a sum of money, you conclude, that is 'sufficient for a good life.' Would it be morally relevant to discover that others had *billions* of dollars, that with your mere millions

you were comparatively very poor? Perhaps it would be relevant. For even in a world of millionaires and billionaires – a world in which everyone was at or above the sufficiency threshold – egalitarianism might still be compelling if the billionaires enjoyed aristocratic supremacy over the millionaires; if they wielded disproportionately great political power; if the millionaires were dominated, oppressed, or subordinated. On this view, egalitarianism will be compelling whenever there is social stratification, class privilege, and hierarchy, no matter how materially well off – in absolute terms – those at the bottom happen to be.⁴ Frankfurt would rejoin that these considerations do not establish the intrinsic value of economic equality. At most, they indicate that equality is valuable as a means to some further set of ends.

There are a number of ways of trying to establish the false thesis that economic equality is actually important. For instance, it is sometimes argued that fraternal relationships among the members of a society are desirable, and that economic equality is more or less indispensable for this. Or it may be maintained that inequalities in the distribution of money are to be avoided because they lead invariably to undesirable discrepancies of other kinds – for example, in social status, in political influence, or in the abilities of people to make effective use of their various opportunities and entitlements. In both of these arguments, economic equality is endorsed because of its supposed importance in creating or in preserving certain noneconomic conditions. Considerations of this sort may well provide convincing reasons for recommending equality as a desirable social good. However, each of the arguments regards economic equality as valuable only *derivatively* – that is, as possessing value only on account of its contingent or instrumental connections to other things. Neither argument attributes to economic equality any unequivocally *intrinsic* value. (Frankfurt 2015, 16–17)

If we follow Frankfurt in accepting that ‘having less is compatible ... with having quite a bit; doing worse than others does not entail doing badly’ (Frankfurt 2015, 69) we see that the morally salient issue is not equality but sufficiency. If everyone had enough, Frankfurt has it, it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others.

Frankfurt spends some time refuting the argument that an equal distribution of money maximizes aggregate utility. This is one of the most powerfully argued sections of *On Inequality*. According to the economic principle of *diminishing marginal utility*, the utility of money diminishes at the margin, so that a ‘marginal dollar always brings less utility to a rich person than it would bring to a person who is less affluent.’ If this is so, the argument goes, an equal distribution of money maximizes the aggregated satisfactions of the members of a society. Frankfurt believes the success of this argument depends on two assumptions, both of which he claims are false. First, it is false that (a) ‘for each individual, the utility of money invariably diminishes at the margin.’ (Frankfurt 2015, 18) After all, having additional money may enable a person to obtain a combination of goods ‘that is (like buttered popcorn) synergistic in the sense that adding one good to another results in more utility than the combined utility of each taken separately.’ (Frankfurt 2015, 32–33) Second, it is false that, (b) ‘with respect to

money, or with respect to the things money can buy, the utility functions of all individuals are the same.' (Frankfurt 2015, 18) Frankfurt thinks it is obvious that, 'at any given level of consumption, there are large differences in the utility derived by different consumers.' This is not only because some people enjoy things with more zest than others do. It is also because many people suffer from physical, mental, or emotional incapacities that limit the levels of satisfaction they are able to enjoy. (Frankfurt 2015, 20–21) If (a) and (b) are both false as Frankfurt claims, this shows that the logic which links economic equality to the maximization of aggregate utility 'does not even get off the ground.' (Frankfurt 2015, 20)

Economic egalitarianism of the sort described by Frankfurt does not have many defenders, making it tempting to dismiss the argument as attacking a 'drily formalistic doctrine' to which virtually no one is committed. (Frankfurt 1988, 156) Apart from a small handful of historical eccentrics, it is unclear who actually endorses the position Frankfurt rejects.⁵ A careful look at the voluminous egalitarian literature will reveal that no one seriously replies to the famous question 'Equality of what?' with the answer 'money.'⁶ It is not an accident, of course, that economic inequalities have occupied a central place in egalitarian theory and politics. For one thing, money is closely bound up with freedom, both in the 'negative' and 'positive' senses of that value. Having money permits one to do a host of things that one could not otherwise do. Not having money by contrast severely constrains the range of activities one is free to pursue. Money is relationally significant as well. This is because in free market societies money can become what Walzer (1983) has called a 'dominant good' – a good whose possession enables the individuals who have it to command a wide range of other goods. A person who has money can buy Persian carpets, Italian suits, Swiss watches, and German automobiles, but she can also secure a better education for her children, influence the outcome of an election, change the editorial tone of a newspaper, and endow a university chair (Waldron 1995, 146). Frankfurt himself is sensitive to the fact that those with greater wealth often enjoy unjust advantages over those with less, noting that,

The richer are in a position to throw around quite a bit more weight than are the poorer, in affecting the character of our social mores and conduct, and in determining the quality and the trajectory of our political life. (Frankfurt 2015, x)

It is commonly argued on these and similar grounds that economic inequality in a society should be kept within reasonable limits. How the phrase 'reasonable limits' should be understood is not a question we need to take up here. The important thing to see is that this is *not* an argument for an equal distribution of money. One need only quickly reflect on what money is, how it works, and what it is for, to see the incoherence of that ideal. 'We may dream of a society where everyone has the same amount of money,' Michael Walzer writes,

But we know that money equally distributed at twelve noon of a Sunday will have been unequally redistributed before the week is out. Some people will save it, and

others will invest it, and still others would spend it (and they will do so in different ways). (Walzer 1983, xi)

Money exists precisely to make just these kinds of activities and transactions possible. It wouldn't *be* money if those who had it were not permitted to save, invest, or spend it.

But even if the 'economic egalitarianism' he attacks in the first half of the book is a view with basically no adherents, Frankfurt clarifies in the second half of the book that the anti-egalitarian implications of his doctrine of sufficiency extend much more widely.

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. Hence, I maintain that none of the egalitarian ideals corresponding to them has any underived moral worth. Once various conceptual misunderstandings and confusions are dispelled, it appears finally that equality as such is of no moral importance. (Frankfurt 2015, 68)

The key conceptual point is that 'having enough' – by which is meant 'enough for a good life' not 'having just enough to get by, or ... having enough to make life marginally tolerable' (Frankfurt 2015, 49) – is not a relational property. The association between having *too* little and having *comparatively* little is entirely contingent. More, having enough does not essentially depend on what others have. It has to do with who a person is, what their plans and ambitions are, with what matters to them. If I have reached a threshold of 'sufficiency' with respect to X – if my share of X is 'enough for a good life' – it is morally irrelevant how my share of X compares with others' shares. 'What makes it an evil that some people have bad lives is not that some other people have better lives,' Frankfurt writes. 'The evil lies simply in the unmistakable fact that bad lives are bad.' (Frankfurt 2015, 73)

Frankfurt and other sufficientarians believe that egalitarians habitually misidentify the object of their moral concern. We inhabit world of staggering inequality, a world in which hundreds of millions of people lead desperate, deeply impoverished lives while others enjoy extraordinary opulence. Egalitarians observe this and conclude – understandably perhaps, but incorrectly – that there is something objectionable about such glaring inequality. Sufficientarians rejoin that the inequality *itself* (*viz.*, the mere fact that some have much more than others) is morally innocuous. What is morally troubling is that some people do not have enough, in some cases catastrophically so. As Frankfurt puts the point:

When we consider people who are substantially worse off than ourselves, we do very commonly find that we are morally disturbed by their circumstances. What directly moves us in cases of that kind, however, is not a relative quantitative discrepancy but an absolute qualitative deficiency. It is not the fact that the economic resources of those who are worse off are smaller than ours. It is the quite different

fact that their resources are too little. The fact about them that disturbs us is that they are so poor. (Frankfurt 2015, 41–42)

Very well. But how much is enough? And how can this idea be specified in a way that ‘provides determinate and plausible guidance for distributive decision makers’? (Casal 2007, 313) Frankfurt readily acknowledges that these are difficult questions. ‘Needless to say, it is far from self-evident precisely what the doctrine of sufficiency means, and what applying it entails,’ he writes. ‘But this is hardly a good reason for adopting, in preference to it, an alternative that is incorrect.’ (Frankfurt 2015, 15)

Sufficientarians have tried to specify the sufficiency threshold in a number of different ways. Frankfurt himself suggests that someone has ‘enough’ when they lack ‘an active interest in getting more. A contented person regards having more ... as inessential to his being satisfied with his life.’ (Frankfurt 2015, 53) This does not mean that such a person would necessarily decline having more; nor that they would prefer their current predicament to all possible alternatives. It just means that, on the whole, such a person ‘does not resent his circumstances, that he is not anxious or determined to improve them, and that he does not go out of his way or undertake any significant initiatives that are designed to make them better.’ (Frankfurt 2015, 56) The notion of ‘enough’ invoked here thus ‘pertains to meeting a standard rather than reaching a limit.’ (Frankfurt 2015, 48)

But notice that ‘lacking an active interest in getting more’ is a strongly subjective measure. The implication is that judgments about ‘having enough for a good life’ are to be made (largely, if not completely) by the person whose life it is.⁷ Viewed in one way this can set the threshold too high. Witness the fabulously successful entrepreneur who, despite her tycoon level holdings, demonstrates an active – even pathological – interest in getting more. But viewed in a different light, it sets the threshold too low. Witness Robert Goodin’s case of ‘The ignorant worker who has not realized that they are paying higher wages up North.’ This worker ‘is deemed satisfied with his sharecropping arrangements and the debt peonage that it entails’ and thus, on Frankfurt’s account, might be said to have enough.⁸ (Goodin 1987, 49) Sufficientarians have tried to respond to these challenges by defining the threshold in more objective ways, within an account of basic natural needs for example. Yet, as Casal rightly points out in her importance article, ‘given their reliance on a conception of adequate longevity or functioning, natural thresholds still lie on a continuum of eligible alternatives.’ (Casal 2007, 313)

Another related challenge involves the problem of arbitrariness. For it seems that the notion of ‘sufficiency’ gives rise to a Sorites paradox: for any conception of ‘having enough’ that might be stipulated, it remains unclear why the threshold might not be, equally plausibly, a little bit higher or a little bit lower. ‘Having enough’ is probably not the sort of thing that can be non-arbitrarily rendered precise. As Richard Arneson elaborates,

Why here and not higher or lower? What we have is a smooth continuum of possible levels of overall capability for flourishing ... I do not see how any unique level (not even a broad thick line) can be picked out such that if a person has that level, she has 'enough'. (Arneson 2000, 56)

The charge of arbitrariness is easily leveled against Roger Crisp, who argues that evaluations about a person's life being 'sufficiently good' should be made by an 'impartial spectator' motivated by compassion. Crisp seems oblivious to the arbitrariness of his threshold when he cavalierly reports, in what seems to me a stunning remark, 'My own intuition is that, say, eighty years of high-quality life on this planet is enough, and plausibly more than enough, for any being.' (Crisp 2003, 762) Casal rejoins that if eighty years of high-quality life is plausibly *more* than enough for any being, then 'seventy something should suffice.' She goes on to argue that, on Crisp's view, 'all of humanity could be allowed to die at seventy something for the sake of any nontrivial benefit to somebody just below the threshold' (Casal 2007, 313–314).

Casal's rejoinder brings another major challenge for sufficientarianism into clearer view. (Alas, Frankfurt does not adequately address it in his book). Namely, since its only concern is to move as many individuals as possible just past a certain threshold, the sufficiency doctrine has no prescriptive power regarding differences above and below the threshold.⁹ So understood, the doctrine of sufficiency clearly has unacceptable consequences. If the sufficientarian's only concern is to maximize the number of people who are sufficiently well off, given that 2 people cannot be moved above the threshold, it will not matter if one dies a terrible death at age 6 whereas the other dies a quick, painless death at age 20. (Arneson 2002, 189) The criticism here is that because judgments about the achievement of sufficiency are binary in nature – a person either has enough or they do not – this makes sufficientarianism insensitive both to *varieties* and *degrees* of well-being. Moving everyone above the sufficiency threshold is a laudable aim, to be sure, yet it does not follow that there are no morally significant differences among those who fall below that line. Frankfurt obliquely engages this criticism at one point when he writes,

It evidently cannot be taken for granted that a person who has a certain amount of a vital resource is necessarily better off than a person who has less; for the larger amount may still be too small – that is, not enough – to serve any useful purpose. (Frankfurt 2015, 38)

And, he continues, 'people who are below a certain utility threshold are not necessarily benefitted by additional resources that move them closer to that threshold. What is crucial for them is to cross the threshold.' (Frankfurt 2015, 39–40) If the phrase 'necessarily benefitted' means something about logic, then Frankfurt is likely correct. But it will virtually always be the case (I do not say it will be a necessary truth) that people who are below the threshold would be better served by getting closer to the threshold. All else being equal, it is better to be just shy of the threshold than to be not even close. After all, to have almost

enough food but not quite is far better than being in a situation of deep and chronic malnutrition.¹⁰

An inverted form of more or less the same problem arises for individuals above the threshold. Nils Holtug gives us the following case.

Suppose that a given individual is at the threshold level ... Suppose also that, due to some (very fortunate) changes in the world economy, everyone else becomes much better off than she is. So everyone but her now has a life of extreme luxury and happiness. It seems to me that, in such a case, we would not only regret the fact that she was 'left behind,' and so attach value to further benefits to her. We would in fact attach greater value to benefits to her than to (further) benefits to others.¹¹ (Holtug 2007, 149–150)

Versions of sufficientarianism have been carefully crafted to respond to these sorts of objections, but that need not detain us here. The larger point is that there are varieties of injustice and unfairness about which the sufficiency stance will be silent. If we come to learn that Wall Street bankers are rewarding themselves with huge, illegitimate bonuses just because they have the power to do so, or that certain people are wealthy because of the exploitative business practices of their ancestors, or that people working in traditionally 'male' occupations receive inflated salaries because of the historical under-valuation of typically 'female' labor, it will hardly be satisfying for us to learn that, despite all of this, everyone nevertheless has 'enough.' (Phillips 1999, 62–63) Casal expresses the larger point this way.

The sufficientarian claim that inequalities among the individuals who have enough are irrelevant ... makes the view unappealing to all those who have convictions about the importance of what Rawls terms *fair equality of opportunity*. Even when everyone has enough, it still seems deeply unfair that merely in virtue of being born into a wealthy family some should have at their disposal all sorts of advantages, contacts, and opportunities while others inherit little more than a name. (Casal 2007, 311)

If this general line of criticism is correct, it shows that sufficientarianism is either a misguided distributional ideal (at worst), or (at best) that it needs to be supplemented with additional ideals.

Nothing said so far should be taken to imply that sufficiency is unimportant. Clearly, a world in which everyone has enough is vastly superior to one in which none or only some do. There is also a deep human truth lurking in the sufficiency view, brought out movingly in the Nozickian aphorism, 'life is not a race.'¹² It can *feel* like a race sometimes. But no one really wants to live a life marked by endless comparison with the condition of others, a life in which one is forever looking over one's shoulder to measure how one is doing *relative to other people*. It is not just that these kinds of comparisons would distract us from what really matters. In a huge number of cases, they would also be unintelligible. People routinely reflect about whether they have gotten 'enough' sleep, whether they have eaten 'enough' or had 'enough' time to relax, and so on. In such cases, 'enough' is a straightforward and unpretentious notion. And

it would be incoherent in these kinds of cases to have our judgments about sufficiency prejudiced by knowledge of how others have fared. (A little joke that also serves as the epigraph to Frankfurt's book cleverly conveys the point: 'First man: "How are your children?" Second man: "Compared to what?") Herein lies the appeal of the sufficiency stance: if everyone had enough, perhaps we could stop comparing our lives with others' and turn our energy and attention to more worthwhile matters.

On Frankfurt's view, egalitarianism is not just conceptually confused. It is spiritually alienating. I take it that this is part of what he has in mind in claiming that, 'the doctrine of equality contributes to the moral disorientation and shallowness of our time' (Frankfurt 2015, 14).

[A] preoccupation with the condition of others interferes with the most basic task on which a person's intelligent selection of monetary goals for himself most decisively depends. It leads a person away from understanding what he himself truly requires in order effectively to pursue his own most authentic needs, interests, and ambitions. Exaggerating the moral importance of economic equality is harmful ... 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. (Frankfurt 2015, 11)

Frankfurt may well be correct that a preoccupation with the condition of others interferes with a person's intelligent reflection on their most authentic needs, interests, and ambitions. But notice that this is a thesis about personal ethics: about how individual men and women ought to live and what they should care about. It is not a thesis about how to craft just legal and political institutions or implement sound social policy. (Goodin 1987) We should remember that virtually every liberal conception of egalitarian justice takes care to distinguish between the egalitarian norms that apply to the institutions of a society, on the one hand, and those to which discrete men and women are answerable, on the other. The important difference between individuals and institutions vis-à-vis egalitarian justice can be upheld in light of the obvious fact that, as Thomas Nagel puts it, 'Institutions, unlike individuals, don't have their own lives to lead' (Nagel 1991, 59). A relentless focus on the condition of others may be alienating within a single human life. That is, egalitarianism may be deficient when understood as a personal ethic. But it is false to say that egalitarianism at the institutional level necessarily suffers from the same defects.

An analogous inattentiveness to the difference between individuals and institutions can be spotted in Frankfurt's positive argument, advanced in the second half of the book, according to which what really matters is not that people be treated equally, but that they be treated with respect. Frankfurt explains that treating a person with respect means '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.' This proscribes against assigning people 'special advantages or disadvantages, except on the basis of considerations that

differentiate them relevantly from those to whom those advantages or disadvantages are not assigned' (Frankfurt 2015, 78). Treating people with respect thus entails impartiality and the avoidance of arbitrariness. The ideal of respect does not require that people be treated the same. Rather, 'those who wish to treat people with respect aim at outcomes matched specifically to the particularities of the individual' (Frankfurt 2015, 78).

It is hard to disagree with Frankfurt about the importance of respect. But it is also unclear whether he intends the ideal of treating people with respect – of dealing with them in an impartial and non-arbitrary way – as corresponding primarily to an imperative of individual or institutional ethics. For, again, virtually every liberal theory in this neighborhood will want a distinction between what treating people with respect means for private individuals as opposed to what it means for political institutions. As Kwame Anthony Appiah expresses the widely held liberal view:

Liberalism, in most accounts, is indeed concerned with moral equality: the state is to display equal respect towards its citizens. Where we go wrong is to suppose that *individuals* should be subject to the same constraint. Social justice may require impartiality – or evenhandedness, or fairness, or (under some construction) 'neutrality'. But social justice is not an attribute of individuals. An individual can no more be required to be impartial among his fellow creatures than he can be obligated to administer his own currency system. (Appiah 2005, 228)

2. Egalitarianism defended

I want to argue that the attractiveness of the sufficiency view and the deep truth it conveys do not strike a fatal blow against egalitarianism. For there is nothing in egalitarianism that forbids acceptance of the moral platitude expressed in sufficientarianism's positive thesis, *viz.*, it is morally important that everyone have enough. Only the most fanatical and mathematical egalitarians could possibly object to that. Nor is there anything in egalitarianism as such that makes it impossible to recognize the banal truth that there are many important things besides equality, and that many dimensions of human affairs are improperly appraised from a relational or comparative point of view. The fact that a relational or comparative point of view is sometimes out of place, however, surely does not mean that it always is. I will argue that egalitarianism gets its purchase from reflection on optimal social relations, and thus presides over precisely those aspects of human affairs for which that relational or comparative point of view is germane.

The important truth in sufficientarianism (and prioritarianism too)¹³ is that all suffering and unhappiness matter in themselves. It would matter just the same if the universe contained no other suffering and unhappiness against which to compare it. As Schopenhauer long ago expressed a parallel thought, 'that thousands had lived in happiness and joy would never do away with the anguish and death-agony of one individual.' (Schopenhauer 2010, 27) Sufficiency and

prioritarianism both impel us to forgo comparisons and to reckon with each life on its own terms. Does recognizing these truths make it impossible to simultaneously affirm the importance of equality? I do not think it does. At most, such recognition indicates that the scope of egalitarianism is not all encompassing. It indicates – what most egalitarians readily admit – that there are domains in which egalitarianism does not apply. Egalitarians can and should welcome the insight that absolute well-being matters. They can and should admit that what matters most of all is that people have good lives, and relatedly, that it is to be regretted wherever human lives are not as good as they could or might be. Indeed, absent the premise about the importance of people having good lives, egalitarianism would be a fatuous doctrine.¹⁴ A non-fatuous egalitarianism will therefore embrace the positive theses of the sufficiency and priority views. Such egalitarians will accept (a) the moral importance of people having ‘enough,’ (however precisely that is to be specified) and also (b) that distributive priority should be assigned to the worst off, while adding to that pair of principles the egalitarian one (c) that it matters (not always, but often enough) how people stand in relation to one another. They can go further and proclaim, (d) that a social world in which human beings relate to one another as equals is normatively superior to one in which that is not the case. Such egalitarians will therefore say ‘no’ to leveling-down (even if the resulting equality is in one way good), and they will say ‘yes’ to Pareto improvements (even if the resulting inequality is in one way bad). They occupy that stance on the grounds that what matters centrally, even more than equality, is that people have good lives. Egalitarians merely add that it also matters (again, not always but sometimes) how people fare relative to each other. The mishmash of positions I have been describing is well captured by one of the founders of this journal, Kai Nielsen, from whom it is worth quoting at length.

Egalitarians aspire to a society, indeed a world, of equals: people with equal human rights, equal in power, equal in access to advantage, equal (insofar as this is possible) in whole-life prospects. Egalitarians want, as far as that is possible, equal well-being for all at the highest level of well-being it is possible to attain. The egalitarian impulse and aspiration is not ... *just* to make the badly off well off, or, if that is not possible, to make them as well off as possible, but to have a world in which there are *no badly off individuals or groups of people*, a world that is not hierarchically stratified (if that is not a pleonasm) along the lines of ‘the worst off,’ ‘the next worse off,’ ‘the middlingly situated,’ ‘the well off,’ ‘the better off,’ and ‘the best off.’ ... We [egalitarians] want a world of equals in which the life of each and everyone will go as well as possible ... [W]hat we deeply want, as egalitarians – our central heuristic ideal, if you will – is a world in which *everyone* is very well off and there are no worse off or better off, but where everyone is equally well off at the highest well-offness that can be achieved. (Nielsen 2003, 143, 157)

In short and to sum up, if it is true that principles of sufficiency, priority, and equality can be combined in various ways, it follows that egalitarians will not be forced into an exclusive choice among them.

3. Conceptual analysis and political philosophy

The main goal of Frankfurt's book is to make a purely conceptual point: to argue that equality has no intrinsic value and, correspondingly, that inequality has no intrinsic disvalue.¹⁵ There may be good reasons to strive for equality, Frankfurt admits. But this is 'always because doing so will promote some other value rather than because equality is itself morally desirable.' (Frankfurt 2015, 68) The question about the intrinsic vs. instrumental value of equality is a quintessentially philosophical one, and readers of *On Inequality* are intermittently reminded that not too much of a practical nature hangs on the correct answer. Frankfurt goes out of his way on a number of occasions in the book to point out that his arguments are 'not inspired or shaped by any social or political ideology,' and that they do not imply 'anything of substance as to the kinds of social or political policies it may be desirable to pursue or avoid' (Frankfurt 2015, 65). This discussion is a strictly conceptual or philosophical one, and it is proudly indifferent to practical matters.

If it is Frankfurt's ambition to show that the attractiveness of equality in social and political affairs is not derived from its literal, mathematical meaning, then I believe that *On Inequality* is a resounding success. The value of equality is understood here in its most literal sense: a purely formal characteristic of the relationship between two items. One would be forgiven for thinking that Frankfurt sometimes loses sight of the difference between treating people *equally* and treating them *as equals*. 'Those who are concerned with equality,' he revealingly says, 'aim at outcomes that are in some pertinent way indistinguishable' (Frankfurt 2015, 78). Throughout the book, 'equality' is taken to mean nothing more than 'quantitative sameness.' It is treated as a disinterested, descriptive, arithmetical tag that might be true of any two things capable of being counted or measured (the height of piles of garbage, grains of sand, levels of welfare, bank account balances, the moral worth of human beings). So treated, Frankfurt may well be correct to conclude that nothing of moral substance follows from this formal relationship alone. We should all be prepared to grant that there is nothing about equality itself – the pure idea, the naked concept – that tells us that an egalitarian society is one worth trying to build. No amount of conceptual analysis will yield the conclusion that equality is a worthy ideal or a lively hope.

But is this flat, literal notion of equality really what people have in mind when they say that our society should be organized as a society of equals? When egalitarians tell us that equality is a value of great social and political importance, when French revolutionaries invoke that value in their slogan, 'Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, ou la mort,' are they really envisaging a society in which people enjoy mathematically identical bundles of holdings or are made equal in some factually countable way? Are they not rather on such occasions affirming a certain vision of social justice, a vision constituted in large part by the idea that social relationships ought to exhibit a certain structure and character? Are

not egalitarians above all interested in a non-hierarchical, democratic social order, in which human beings stand to one another as equals? (If equality meant nothing more than 'quantitative sameness' or 'mathematical equivalence,' it is hard to see why that value should have been at the forefront of our moral and political imaginations for centuries, or, more to the point, why anyone should have organized a political movement in its name.) In short, Frankfurt seems to take for granted throughout his book that equality is an essentially distributive idea. He overlooks the possibility that the value of equality in social and political affairs might be better understood as an ideal governing human relationships, rather than fundamentally an ideal about the equal distribution of something.

What makes egalitarianism a distinctive and important view is that it gives voice to a fundamental concern for how individuals fare relative to each other. So many aspects of our lives feature this relational or comparative dimension. It is important that we stand to each other as equals, and this importance can manifest itself in all sorts of ways. As Samuel Scheffler explains:

[E]quality is most compelling when it is understood as a social and political ideal that includes but goes beyond the proposition that all people have equal moral worth. It is this ideal that we invoke when we say that our society should be organized as a society of equals. The case is analogous to other human relationships that we take to be governed by an ideal of equality. When we say, for example, that a friendship or a marriage should be a relationship of equals, we do not mean merely that the participants are of equal moral worth but also that their relationship should have a certain structure and character. Similarly, I believe, our notion of a society of equals expresses a normative ideal of human relations.¹⁶ (Scheffler 2003, 33–34)

Adam Smith was highlighting this normative ideal of human relations when, in the second volume of *The Wealth of Nations* [1776], he distinguished between 'those commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life' and 'whatever the customs of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even the lowest order to be without.' The famous example, of course, is a linen shirt. Clearly, having a linen shirt is in no way necessary for life: 'The Greeks and Romans lived ... very comfortably though they had no linen.' Still, a

creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt ... Custom, in the same manner, has rendered leather shoes a necessary for life in England ... the poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them. (Smith 1976, 469–471)

Anne Phillips points out that Smith's distinction, 'will speak volumes to those hard pressed parents who have enough to buy shoes for their children but not enough for trainers in the requisite mode.' (Phillips 1999, 63)

In a society where access to the common culture has come to depend on watching the same programmes on TV, having a television set becomes a necessity rather than a luxury. In a society where car ownership has become widespread, it can be hard for those without cars to get access to basic amenities: shopping centres are often located in areas difficult to reach by public transport; indeed public

transport may collapse when the richer members of the community no longer use it. (Phillips 1999, 62–63)

There is much we miss by focusing exclusively on people's absolute levels of well-being. It frequently matters how we fare compared to others. Such comparisons are germane to people's ability to 'appear in public without shame' and to their self-esteem; to their ability as citizens to participate politically on equal terms; to have their voice heard on matters of common concern; to be and to feel like full-fledged members of one's society, and so much more. If this is what makes egalitarianism a compelling moral and political ideal, I cannot see that any of the arguments in *On Inequality* should make us suspicious of it.

Frankfurt's writings on egalitarianism and sufficientarianism have now become important touchstones in the literature. His arguments have brought sophistication and clarity to subsequent discussions about the value of equality. It is unfortunate that Frankfurt fails to engage directly in *On Inequality* with the deluge of important work in distributive ethics that came in the wake of his own important contributions. Nevertheless, this little book is a pleasure to read. No one who self-identifies as an egalitarian can afford to ignore it.

Notes

1. Readers may find the sequence of argument a little bit peculiar here. Why does Frankfurt expend the energy repudiating (merely) 'economic' egalitarianism in the first part of the book when egalitarianism *as such* is repudiated in the second part? This is explained by the fact that much of the previously published material Frankfurt draws from in *On Inequality* was published about a decade apart. See Frankfurt (1987); from which a portion of part I is drawn. Part II makes use of material from Frankfurt (1997). We are told in the book's acknowledgments that the previously published material appeared 'in a somewhat different form' (Frankfurt 2015, 91) but I cannot detect any noteworthy differences in substance between that material and what is offered in *On Inequality*.
2. The literature on sufficientarianism and prioritarianism has been growing rapidly in recent years. A very small sample includes, Benbaji (2005); Brown (2005); Casal (2007); Crisp (2003), Huseby (2010); Parfit (1991); Shields (2012) and Temkin (2003). It is a shame that Frankfurt does not consider prioritarianism in *On Inequality*, especially since prioritarians and sufficientarians usually agree about the moral insignificance of egalitarian (comparative) assessments.
3. The distinction between a positive and negative thesis was originally made in Casal (2007). It has since become a commonplace in the sufficientarian literature.
4. As G.A. Cohen importantly notes, 'a person's effective share depends on what he can do with what he has, and that depends not only on how much he has but on what others have and on how what others have is distributed.' (Cohen 1995, 26–27) If this is true, egalitarians must maintain their zeal in a world of millionaires and billionaires.
5. François Noël ('Gracchus') Babeuf is a rare but obvious exception. As is well known, Babeuf was executed in 1797 for his role in the so-called conspiracy of equals; a plan launched to overthrow the *Directoire* and establish an egalitarian republic. Babeuf believed in a flat equality of wages, the abolition of private property, and was more than prepared to impede the more talented members of society

from making use of their superior talents if that is what 'real equality' ended up requiring. Indeed, Babeuf was not particularly interested in what might be lost with the implementation of his 'société des égaux.' Isaiah Berlin's description of Babeuf's egalitarianism as 'pure-hearted' and 'fanatical' seems exactly right. (Berlin 1996, 81) For what it is worth, I cannot think of any present-day egalitarians who endorse anything remotely close to Babeuf's view.

6. A reviewer is skeptical about this claim. Most political philosophers, he or she says, are Rawlsians of some kind and thus believe in distributing income and wealth. I think the reviewer's point misses the mark. While money is indeed one of Rawls's 'primary goods,' nowhere does Rawls even come close to arguing for an equal distribution of money. Rather, he thinks that money should be distributed in accordance with 'the difference principle' (which is, as is well known, an *inequality*-justifying principle). While I agree with the reviewer that most political philosophers are (broadly) Rawlsians, the suggestion that Rawls or his followers endorse what Frankfurt calls 'economic egalitarianism' is simply not true as far as I can tell.
7. See Huseby (2010) for a view in the same neighborhood. On his view, a sufficient level of welfare is a level at which a person is content. It seems obvious, however, that subjective contentedness is a far better indicator of sufficiently high *welfare levels* (as in Huseby's formulation) than it is for the sufficiency of *wealth levels*, or resource-holding-levels more generally (as in Frankfurt's).
8. A closely related criticism involves the phenomenon of 'adaptive preferences.' Frankfurt seems to acknowledge the force of the criticism when he notes that people may be led to 'settle for too little' by downwardly adapting their preferences and desires to their circumstances. He concedes that the presumption that a person's life is genuinely fulfilling cannot be confirmed simply in virtue of the fact that they are 'not inclined to complain.' Yet, he also adds, 'it cannot be presumed that when a person has accommodated his intentions and desires to his circumstances, this is itself evidence that something has gone wrong' (Frankfurt 2015, 61–62).
9. Benbaji (2005) has argued that this is a non-charitable interpretation of the doctrine. Perhaps so.
10. A reviewer incisively suggests that, contrary to what I argue, Frankfurt may well be sensitive to degrees of suffering below the threshold. For, on this reading of Frankfurt's argument, the reason we should not provide an extra unit of some vital resource to those who have none is because this may needlessly prolong their suffering. Frankfurt writes: 'Even if we suppose that a person with one unit of food or medicine may live a bit longer than someone with no food or medicine whatsoever, perhaps it is really worse to prolong the process of starvation or of illness for a short time than it would be to terminate sooner the foreseeable agony.' (Frankfurt 2015, 38) I find a certain coldness in this passage, but I am nevertheless given pause by the reviewer's interpretation of it. If minimizing prolonged suffering is a feature of Frankfurt's sufficientarianism, perhaps it is sensitive to degrees of suffering below the threshold after all.
11. Casal offers this analogous case. '[S]uppose that having provided every patient with enough medicine, food, comfort, and so forth, a hospital receives a fantastic donation, which includes spare rooms for visitors, delicious meals, and the best in the world cinema. If its administrators then arbitrarily decide to devote all those luxuries to just a few fortunate beneficiaries their decision would be unfair.' (Casal 2007, 307) Thomas Christiano's case involving the division of office space in an academic building yields essentially the same conclusion. 'Suppose that

each person thinks that a single office is quite enough for performing the tasks of doing research, receiving students, relaxing by listening to music, or reading a novel, and so on. Surely no one will quarrel with this. Now suppose that there are four separable and similar rooms to be divided between two people. The chairman gives one to one of them and three to another. He does not ground this difference on differential need or on greater merit. He reasons that one is sufficient for the one and three is more than sufficient for the other and there is no reason to be concerned about the inequality. The person with three offices will now have separate offices in which to receive students, work, and relax or read. Let us suppose that both can get along with only one office but that they both also like the idea of separate rooms for separate activities. Is there no injustice here? Surely there is and one of these people will complain loudly about the unequal treatment over and above the adequate' (Christiano 2008, 28).

12. The same thought is also elegantly conveyed in David Schmidtz's article, 'Choosing Strategies,' collected in Schmidtz (2008).
13. Prioritarianism is the view that distributive priority should be given to the worst off. Prioritarians add to this simple idea the principle that the urgency of benefitting the worst off is greater the worse off they happen to be. Like sufficientarians, prioritarians are usually explicit about what they see as the negative, anti-egalitarian upshot of their view. They think priority should be given to the worst off, never because doing so will reduce inequality, but for other reasons. As Derek Parfit explains: 'People at higher altitudes find it harder to breathe. Is this because they are higher up than other people? In one sense, yes. But they would find it just as hard to breathe even if there were no other people who were lower down. In the same way, on the Priority View, benefits to the worse off matter more, but that is only because these people are at a lower *absolute* level. It is irrelevant that these people are worse off *than others*. Benefits to them would matter just as much even if there *were* no others who were better off ... On the Priority View, we are concerned only with people's absolute levels' (Parfit 1991, 23).
14. An egalitarianism that was indifferent to absolute levels of well-being would clearly have no qualms with 'leveling-down.' We should remember that even those philosophers who see the good in leveled-down equality (G.A. Cohen and Larry Temkin, most famously) do not see it as *unqualifiedly* good, or good *without qualms*. An egalitarianism that was totally indifferent to absolute levels of well-being congers thoughts of the monstrous predicament described by Vonnegut in *Harrison Bergeron* (Vonnegut 1968). This is the stuff of dystopian science fiction: the kind of egalitarianism in which the strong are forced to carry weights so as to be made equal in strength with everyone else. But once the proper focus on people having good lives is secured, the leveling-down objection against egalitarianism loses much of its force. I don't here adopt a stance on whether the equality that is achieved by leveling down is in one way good. Trading in moral intuitions is a tricky business. And it is notoriously difficult to *prove* that inequality is bad. (Temkin 1993, 282) But it will be enough to note that contemporary political philosophy is marked by deeply held intuitions on both sides of that issue. For his part, Frankfurt says on the very first page of *On Inequality* that leveling down 'has very little to be said for it.' (Frankfurt 2015, 3).
15. Frankfurt is not alone in making this argument, of course. T.M. Scanlon similarly argues that, '[t]he idea that equality is, in itself, a fundamental moral value turns out to play a surprisingly limited role in [the] reasons for thinking that many of the forms of inequality which we see around us should be eliminated.' (Scanlon

2003, 202) Similar conclusions can be found throughout the sufficientarian and prioritarian literature.

16. These sentiments are echoed, among many other places, in Anderson (1999) and Miller (1999).

Notes on contributor

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