

Frankfurt

Equality as a Moral Ideal

Questions

- Why do we think discrepancies in income and wealth is a problem?
- At what (economic) point should these discrepancies be rectified?
- What does economic equality guarantee?

Economic Egalitarianism

- Economic Egalitarianism is the "doctrine that it is desirable for everyone to have the same amount of income and wealth"
- Frankfurt thinks economic equality is not a morally compelling social ideal
- Nonetheless, he admits that a commitment to egalitarian social policies might enable the promotion and enjoyment of goods other than equality

Doctrine of Sufficiency

- "With respect to the distribution of economic assets, what is important from the point of view of morality *is* not that everyone should have *the same* but that each should have *enough*. If everyone had enough it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others. I shall refer to this alternative to egalitarianism—namely, that what is morally important with respect to money is for everyone to have enough—as "the doctrine of sufficiency."

Economic Equality Alienates

- Equality for its own sake distracts people from determining what one cares about and what will actually satisfy one
- Discovering what one cares about and what goods are important to one are what an "intelligent" selection of economic goods requires
- Alienation occurs when one exaggerates the moral importance of equality and leads one to compare one's economic status with that of others

Easy Egalitarianism

- Focusing on equality is easier than focusing on what is enough
 - It is easier to calculate the size of an equal share than determining how much one needs in order to have enough
 - The concept of "equal share" is simpler and more accessible than the concept of "having enough"
- There is a problem of determining what the doctrine of sufficiency means or entails
 - Despite this problem Frankfurt does not think it is a good reason for discarding the notion

Why is Economic Equality Thought to be Important?

1. Economic equality is thought to be important because inequalities in distribution of benefits should be avoided because it leads to discrepancies in social status, political influence, or abilities to take advantage of various entitlements
2. Economic equality is thought to be important because "an egalitarian distribution of economic assets maximizes their aggregate utility"
 - This argument is based on the principle of diminishing marginal utility

What is Marginal Utility?

- Marginal utility is the amount that utility increases with an increase of one unit of an economic good or service
- The argument for the principle of diminishing marginal utility assumes both that (a) the utility of money diminishes at the margin and (b) the utility functions of money or goods are the same for all individuals
 - Concept of diminishing marginal utility requires that both (a) and (b) are true
 - If true, then a marginal dollar brings less utility to a rich man than a poor man
 - This means that total utility increases when inequality is reduced because it gives a dollar to the poorer and takes it from the richer

Is the Argument for Diminishing Marginal Utility Sound?

- Frankfurt thinks both (a) and (b) can be shown false
 - (b): it is false that the utility functions of all individuals are the same
 - some people derive more satisfaction out of less money than others, while others are incapable of obtaining satisfaction
 - (a): it is false the utility of money diminishes at the margin
 - It could be that one might lose interest in what one is consuming without losing interest in that one is consuming
 - Or, it could be that one's interest increases over time
 - If that is the case, then the marginal utility of money need not diminish at the margins

Will an Egalitarian Distribution Maximize Aggregate Utility?

- Aggregate utility: total utility considered with reference to its parts
- Will an egalitarian distribution maximize aggregate utility?
 - Not necessarily
 - example of car and gas $G(n)$ and tires $G(i)$, each by itself is useful but
 - $G(n+i)$ greater utility than $G(n)$ and $G(i)$ separately and each's utility combined
 - Acquiring $G(n+i)$ passes a utility threshold and leads to greater utility than considering total utility of each of the parts

Scarcity and Egalitarianism

- Is it possible for a egalitarian distribution to be morally unacceptable?
- Consider a population which does not have resources available to provide for everyone's needs.
 - If there were an equal distribution, then everyone would starve and/or face hardship.
 - So, it seems the morally acceptable thing is to endorse an unequal distribution that guarantees the survival of the most people
- There is the additional problem of giving resources to those below a "utility threshold"
 - Giving goods to those below the threshold who will not be raised above the threshold by these goods, does them no good--what is necessary is to raise them above the threshold

Is Inequality Morally Undesirable?

- One reason for rejecting inequality is that inequality sometimes appears morally objectionable
 - Having too much money corrupts
 - Paris Hilton enjoying more than the average citizen seems morally offensive
- Is the moral offensiveness really due to others having less money than Paris, or in their having too little money?
- Suppose P has lots of money, Q has enough money to enjoy his life, R has too little money and can't provide basic needs
 - In which of these does moral offensiveness arise?

Logical Independence

- Egalitarianism and the Doctrine of Sufficiency are logically independent
- Just because poverty is undesirable does not mean inequality is
 - What makes someone poor in the morally relevant sense?
 - Does it have anything to do with equality?
 - Dworkin's problem is that the U.S. fails to guarantee that everyone in society has enough to lead "a life of choice and value"

Egalitarianism's Fundamental Error

- "The fundamental error of egalitarianism lies in supposing that it is morally important whether one person has less than another regardless of how much either of them has. This error is due in part to the false assumption that someone who is economically worse off has more important unsatisfied needs than someone who is better off."

Life At the Bottom

- Does life at the bottom of the economic ladder mean that one is worse off?
- Could it be that life at the bottom isn't so bad at all?
- Why think that life at the bottom is not fulfilling, rewarding, or fulfilling?
- Why think that every individual is trying to maximize obtainable benefits?

When is Enough Enough?

- Doctrine of Sufficiency says that "enough" refers to "*meeting a standard*" rather than to "*reaching a limit*"
 - Having enough means being content with what one has
 - Doctrine of sufficiency does not mean that having enough is living on the edge and barely having enough to get by
- What does being "content" entail?
 - Being content with money means that one does not have an active interest in getting more
 - A contented person regards having more money as *inessential* to his being satisfied with his life.

A Morality of Contentment?

- Being content may not require one to compare one's own economic situation with others
- One's being content with one's resources may be based on a "conscientiously intelligent and penetrating evaluation of the circumstances" of one's life