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On Inequality



Synopsis

Economic inequality is one of the most divisive issues of our time. Yet few would argue that inequality is a greater evil than poverty. The poor suffer because they don't have enough, not because others have more, and some have far too much. So why do many people appear to be more distressed by the rich than by the poor? In this provocative book, the #1 New York Times bestselling author of *On Bullshit* presents a compelling and unsettling response to those who believe that the goal of social justice should be economic equality or less inequality. Harry Frankfurt, one of the most influential moral philosophers in the world, argues that we are morally obligated to eliminate poverty--not achieve equality or reduce inequality. Our focus should be on making sure everyone has a sufficient amount to live a decent life. To focus instead on inequality is distracting and alienating. At the same time, Frankfurt argues that the conjunction of vast wealth and poverty is offensive. If we dedicate ourselves to making sure everyone has enough, we may reduce inequality as a side effect. But it's essential to see that the ultimate goal of justice is to end poverty, not inequality. A serious challenge to cherished beliefs on both the political left and right, *On Inequality* promises to have a profound impact on one of the great debates of our time.

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Customer Reviews

This is a really short book, less than 100 pages, which pages are not even full-size to begin with. I read it on a flight from Miami to New York and still had time to do the "hard" Sudoku puzzle in the airline magazine. But it is well worth reading. Simply stated, the author, a professor of philosophy at

Princeton who previously wrote a popular book called "On Bullsh*t" bluntly rejects the pursuit of economic equality as a morally valid goal. He characterizes such a pursuit as "alienating" a person from his or her own self, by defining said person by reference to what others have or lack. Using economic equality to define a person's moral status means that if one has more income or wealth than others, one should feel guilt, and if one has less, one should feel victimized. This means that people can not be satisfied or happy based on their personal assessment of their own lives and that is why he defines the economic equality frame as "alienating". For some reason I don't quite understand, he eschews use of words like "envy", "jealousy" or "covetousness" to describe that state of mind. He also discusses attempts to justify economic equality based on the theory of "diminishing marginal utility" which postulates that the marginal value of an additional dollar to a person who is already well off is less than to a person who has substantial needs. First, he notes, that such an argument is really an argument for a basic level of sufficiency, not ultimate equality. Once both persons have a sufficient amount, and what is being compared is two persons' desire to purchase a discretionary item, the proposition is not credible.

Harry Frankfurt's chief attractions are his clear arguments and his short, easy to read books. His *On Bullshit* was welcome because there is indeed so much long-winded bullshit in professional philosophy and social theory journals and books. People who have virtually nothing new to say find ways to say it with big words, in my territory, tons of equations and esoteric references. In this book, Frankfurt argues that egalitarianism, by which he means favoring equal distribution of wealth and income, is not a moral ideal. By that he means that there is no reason to favor more equal over less equal on principle, although there may be moral effects of inequality that are undesirable. What is morally important, he argues, is that people have enough of what they need to live a decent life. If that requires some form of distributional equity, so be it. He also argues that excessive consumption by the well off, in the face of the destitution of the poor, is a form of gluttony that is disgusting and offensive. The rich should not act that way. But that does not imply that equality, or even a move towards equality, is a moral good in and of itself. I quite agree with this argument. Perhaps more important, I believe that at least in my society (the USA), almost everyone agrees that inequality is not a moral evil, although many do not agree, as Frankfurt and argue, that poverty is a moral evil. I believe it is inherently unfair that a child born in one family have a much greater chance at a decent life than a child born in another family. I do not believe that this is completely remedial as long as children are raised in families and families are heterogeneous in their capacity to raise their children properly.

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