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Source: *Ethics*, Vol. 125, No. 4 (July 2015), pp. 1171-1173

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/680890>

Accessed: 09/07/2015 14:01

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On Harry Frankfurt's "Equality as a Moral Ideal"*

Thomas Mulligan

It is natural to think that there is something wrong with inequality. Many people share an intuition that interpersonal differences in wealth, income, and other goods are unjust, an intuition which has given rise to egalitarian theories of distributive justice.

At the same time, it seems to be a fact of our species that we cannot help but compare ourselves to our peers, lamenting what we lack and delighting in having what others do not. Indeed, for some, having more of a good than others is more important than having the good itself; as John Stuart Mill observes, "men do not desire merely to be *rich*, but to be *richer* than other men."¹

In "Equality as a Moral Ideal," Harry Frankfurt argues that there is nothing intrinsically unjust about economic inequality and that what is important, morally, is not that everyone have the same amount of money, but that everyone have *enough*. Frankfurt's argument has become a standard objection to egalitarianism, and the article regarded as a seminal contribution to sufficientarian theory. Frankfurt also has something to say about the good life, about contentment, and about the Sisyphean quest for perfection, and these insights are worth revisiting now, in light of our contemporary infatuation with comparing and ranking things (universities, graduate programs, journals, etc.), our cultural perfectionism, and rising social, professional, and existential restlessness. Frankfurt teaches us that when we have the things that we want, and these things are good enough—even if imperfect, and even if others have more—then there is nothing to be dissatisfied about.

* A retrospective essay on Harry Frankfurt, "Equality as a Moral Ideal," *Ethics* 98 (1987): 21–43. All unattributed page references are to this article. I thank Tulane's School of Liberal Arts and the Murphy Institute for supporting this work.

1. John Stuart Mill, "On Social Freedom: Or the Necessary Limits of Individual Freedom Arising out of the Conditions of Our Social Life," *Oxford and Cambridge Review* (June 1907): 69.

Ethics 125 (July 2015): 1171–1173

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Why are interpersonal comparisons pernicious? There are two reasons. First, they are undignified. To become discontented as a result of such a comparison is, Frankfurt says, to let another person dictate what is meaningful in one's own life, thus "divert[ing] a person's attention away from endeavoring to discover—within his experience of himself and of his life—what he himself really cares about and what will actually satisfy him" (23). In addition, we abstractly injure those who have even less than we do when we allow these comparisons to damage our happiness. With over a billion human beings living in conditions of extreme poverty, there is something depraved about failing to enjoy a steak dinner because the person at the next table is eating lobster thermidor.

Second, interpersonal comparisons make us unhappy. Sophie develops a plan of life which includes obtaining some good *G* in a certain measure. Through talent and effort she does so. She is content until she finds out that Bill has more of *G* than she. But why should that matter to Sophie? She has exactly what she wanted. Moreover, Bill may be unsatisfied, since his plan of life might include possessing *G* in greater measure than he has. Thus, Sophie might, perversely, be upset about succeeding where another has failed.

We must also keep in mind that pursuits of goods take place within a holistic plan of life. Sophie forwent some opportunities in pursuit of *G*, and Bill forwent even more given his greater appetite for *G*. For this reason, comparing oneself to a peer along a single dimension (e.g., the possession of *G*) is uninformative; the fact that my peer has more of *G* than I do gives me no reason to be envious or resentful, since his plan of life might be in shambles while mine is satisfactory.

Frankfurt also defends the ideal of contentment against our perfectionistic impulses, and in doing so prefigures the findings of recent empirical research: perfectionists die younger,² are more vulnerable to depression,³ and have worse sex lives.⁴ And perfectionist academics produce less and lower quality research than their nonperfectionist colleagues.⁵

2. Prem S. Fry and Dominique L. Debats, "Perfectionism and the Five-Factor Personality Traits as Predictors of Mortality in Older Adults," *Journal of Health Psychology* 14 (2009): 513–24.

3. Paul L. Hewitt, Gordon L. Flett, and Evelyn Ediger, "Perfectionism and Depression: Longitudinal Assessment of a Specific Vulnerability Hypothesis," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 105 (1996): 276–80.

4. A. Marie Habke, Paul L. Hewitt, and Gordon L. Flett, "Perfectionism and Sexual Satisfaction in Intimate Relationships," *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment* 21 (1999): 307–22.

5. Simon B. Sherry et al., "Perfectionism Dimensions and Research Productivity in Psychology Professors: Implications for Understanding the (Mal)Adaptiveness of Perfectionism," *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* 42 (2010): 273–83.

Those self-interested grounds aside, as with interpersonal comparisons we have moral reasons to avoid perfectionism. Frankfurt points them out to us: "Suppose that a man deeply and happily loves a woman who is altogether worthy. We do not ordinarily criticize the man in such a case just because we think he might have done even better" (40). Even if it were true that this man could have "done better," and even if he would have incurred no costs in doing so, surely he has no grounds for complaint and it would be wrong to criticize him. Once again, the reason is that when one has something that is good, and meaningful, and lacking for so many, then one has a moral responsibility to appreciate and enjoy it.

The theoretical lesson of "Equality as a Moral Ideal" is that the pursuit of equality may distract us from what is truly important: ensuring that everyone has sufficient economic resources. As I have tried to illuminate here, the article can also serve as a practical guide for living a happy and principled life. And it is the mark of a great work of philosophy, like Frankfurt's, that even after teaching us much, when we look at it fresh, from a different perspective, we learn something new.