

Throughout the book, the authors repeatedly lament the “transformation of Spanish politics from a model of ‘consensus politics’ to a new model characterized by political conflict and increasing confrontation” (p. 11). They are quick to add that this transformation represents a “normalization” of sorts. Along with the definitive consolidation and entrenchment of democratic institutions, the country has “developed many of the imperfections that are common in other Western democracies.” Most prominent among these, “a government-opposition game in which highly publicized issues are considered largely for their value in the next election” (p. 229). One prominent example of this new style of confrontational politics that the authors provide is the case of abortion, to which the book dedicates an interesting chapter.

But the most divisive of these “highly publicized issues” is, without a doubt, “political decentralization,” to which the book devotes considerable, well-deserved attention as well. The authors develop an elaborate critique of what they consider irresponsible, “electoralist” behaviour, especially on the part of the conservative party (PP), who has paid much attention to the issue, particularly while in opposition, “as a strategy to force the government to take a position about one of the most controversial issues in Spanish politics.” According to the authors, such a strategy of increasing confrontation over decentralization has proven quite effective for the PP; by making the effort to keep scarce public attention focused on this most divisive issue, the PP has been able to exact high electoral costs on its main rival, the socialist party (PSOE). In effect, the PP has successfully managed to drive a wedge between most of the PSOE electorate, which “opposes increasing decentralization,” and the PSOE constituency in Catalonia and the Basque Country, which is nevertheless crucial for the PSOE “to win the general election” (p. 109).

The authors also highlight the role of the print media in contributing to the transformation from consensus to conflict over decentralization in recent years. To this end, they document the increasingly “negative tone” in the coverage of “state-regions relations” in both *El Mundo* and *El País* (p. 144).

This is only part of the story, of course—focused nearly exclusively on political and media dynamics at the “center” in Madrid. To arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the trend towards increasing conflict over decentralization would certainly require more serious attention to relatively-autonomous political and media dynamics at work in Catalonia as well.

There are, however, some crucial exceptions to the trend of increasing polarization and confrontation—exceptions also analysed in the book. The first of these has to do with Europeanization, in support of which a longstanding and very broad political, media, and public consensus remains firmly entrenched. This “despite the fact the EU is increasingly limiting the capacity of Spanish

policymakers to define their agenda according to their policy preferences” (pp. 16–17).

Relatedly, there is the matter of the infamous reform of Article 135 of the Spanish Constitution, approved in September of 2011 under pressure from European authorities, which constitutionally embedded the prioritization of interest and principal payments on public debt over all other public expenditures. The amendment was expressly “designed to mitigate concerns over the willingness of Spanish governments to control public finance,” and it signalled the unity of the PP and the PSOE in unflinching mutual commitment to “economic reforms” (pp. 58–59).

On matters of political economy, the governing ethos of the country remains one of consensus. Consensus in favour of “responsiveness” to the dictates of European authorities, themselves committed to “responsibly” representing and enforcing the interests of the big banks first. As such, the emergent culture of confrontation over some issues would seem to simultaneously serve as a smoke-screen, one that has proven capable thus far of keeping the potential for fissure over the “fundamentals” of austerity effectively at bay.

The recent general election in Spain has resulted in a stalemate, along with a dramatic restructuring of the country’s party system. Ongoing corruption scandals, combined with continuing commitment to unpopular and painful austerity measures, have seriously wounded the traditional parties, thereby contributing to party system fragmentation and the spectacular rise of anti-establishment alternatives on both the left (PODEMOS) and center-right (Ciudadanos). It will be interesting to see how these unprecedented transformations in the party system will affect the trends charted in the book.

A crisis of governability looms on the horizon for the foreseeable future, whether or not new elections are held; meanwhile, the Catalan regional authorities continue to defy the country’s constitutional order. But despite all this uncertainty, austerity remains for now the only game in Spain.

**On Inequality.** By Harry G. Frankfurt. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. 102p. \$14.95.  
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— David Lay Williams, *DePaul University*

After lurking in the background for decades of steady and nearly unnoticed growth, economic inequality has come to demand wide attention. Some politicians, such as Bernie Sanders, have defined their campaigns by addressing this as the age’s foremost challenge. And even those who established their campaigns on different terms have acknowledged the creeping issue and have tapped into it to promote their particular platforms. Similarly, after decades of relative inattention, scholars have become considerably

more attentive to economic inequality's sources and various social implications. Most notably, Thomas Piketty's *Capitalism in the 21st Century* (2014) has come to dominate this discussion. Piketty argues that the relative economic equality of the middle twentieth century was more an anomaly than the necessary outcome of more than a century of Western capitalism. In fact, his bold thesis is that without serious intervention, unchecked market economies will necessarily distribute resources even more unequally than during the "Gilded Age."

In *On Inequality*, Harry G. Frankfurt acknowledges Piketty's research and certainly the fact that many regard the aforementioned trends as "deplorable" (p. ix). His type of book, however, is very different from Piketty's. While Piketty himself does not hesitate to repeatedly condemn economic inequality as "excessive," "shameful," "beyond all reasonable limits," and "terrifying" the French economist does not seek to explain why inequality might be understood as such. Rather, in Frankfurt's view, such condemnations reflect a kind of "elementary common sense" (p. 81). This is pardonable in Piketty, as he is not a philosopher. But if one is to take seriously the problem of economic inequality in the twenty-first century, then surely this calls for a prominent philosopher to take up the challenge of outlining the moral and political difficulties that economic inequality introduces.

Frankfurt surely has such status. As an emeritus philosopher from Princeton, not only is he highly respected in academic circles, but through a series of brief and accessible books on philosophical topics, he has also established himself as someone capable of speaking to a broad audience. If ever there was anyone to take on this task, then, Frankfurt is perhaps the most obvious choice.

Yet Frankfurt does not provide anything like the condemnation of economic inequality that people like Sanders and Piketty might demand. Rather, he seemingly pushes back against these calls to condemn inequality, arguing that "it is misguided to endorse economic egalitarianism as an authentic moral ideal" (p. xi). This is a thesis that he pursues relentlessly through this relatively slim 89-page monograph.

Frankfurt divides his book and its arguments into two halves. The first, more substantive, half is dedicated to a critique of economic egalitarianism, most centrally as manifested in the writings of Abba Lerner (1903–82). The choice of a relatively obscure, long-deceased, twentieth-century economist as a primary interlocutor represents a peculiar choice for Frankfurt. More obvious choices might have included the philosophers, economists, or political scientists who have been attacking economic inequality steadily over the past decade. Or alternatively, he might have engaged the very rich tradition of canonical philosophers who have criticized economic inequality for more than two millennia. This aside for the moment, it is essential to note that Frankfurt's arguments take place

almost exclusively on the narrow moral terrain of the school of Utilitarianism—the doctrine established in the eighteenth century that identifies morally preferable actions as those promoting the greatest aggregate pleasure/happiness or diminishing the most pain.

Lerner's straightforward argument for equality derives from the principle of diminishing marginal utility. His thesis is that resources are inefficiently distributed in radically unequal societies, insofar as wealthy members derive very little utility from acquiring greater resources, while relatively poorer ones derive significant utility from the same.

Frankfurt responds that Lerner falsely supposes that utility actually diminishes for everyone at the margins. For him, arguments for diminishing marginal utility are largely anecdotal and unsupported (pp. 21–24). Oftentimes, he argues, the sustained consumption of some items increases with greater accumulation—as might happen, for example, with stamp or fine arts collectors (pp. 31–33). In fact, collectors on the verge of completing a "set" can experience far greater utility toward the end of their pursuit than they do in the earlier stages. This suggests, at least for some, a principle of increasing marginal utility, rather than its opposite. And if this is true, Frankfurt concludes, "an egalitarian distribution of income may fail to maximize aggregate utility" (p. 34).

Another strategy the author employs is to consider egalitarianism in the context of scarce resources (pp. 34–40). He asks his readers to imagine a scenario in which 10 people require five units of food each in order to survive, but only 40 total units are available for distribution. In this case, he notes, a strictly egalitarian distribution of four units each would result in the certain death of all 10 people. That is, not only does egalitarianism fail to maximize aggregate utility; it also ensures the death of all its members. It would be, in his words, "morally grotesque" (p. 35). Further, he adds, it is "a mistake to claim that where some people have less than enough, no one should have more than enough" (p. 37). Imagine, for example, that there are 41 units available rather than 40. Assuming that five units go to eight people each, where does the extra unit go? Surely not to one of the two starving people, according to Frankfurt, since "the extra unit is of no particular use . . . to him" (pp. 37–40). The additional unit, therefore, should be distributed to someone else who already has enough food, since this would presumably boost aggregate utility.

Such arguments, however, seem to adopt a kind of misguided and even cruel variant of utilitarianism. Frankfurt's denial of resources to terminal cases has striking implications. Consider, for example, that there are a limited number of violinists in the world. Does it make sense, therefore, to deploy any of them to hospices to distract and entertain terminal cancer patients? Surely, by Frankfurt's logic, their utility has ceased to be relevant.

Instead, these violinists should presumably be deployed in concert halls for well people. Even by the standards of utilitarianism, this seems false and not a little perverse. As anyone with experience in these matters can confirm, terminal cancer patients can experience pleasure and especially pain. Assuming this to be the case, it would seem that a more egalitarian distribution of violinists would promote greater aggregate utility. Indeed, the author's logic would seem to condemn palliative care more generally, since it would divert scarce resources to those fated to die.

There is another difficulty in Frankfurt's argument specifically within the context of his own utilitarianism. Utilitarianism must acknowledge a certain subjectivity in the experiences of pleasure and pain. That is, different people experience pleasure and pain in different things. Yet Frankfurt wants to deny the legitimacy of pain associated with inequality. Rather, the real and genuine pain for him is associated with the kind of deprivations that accompany absolute poverty (pp. 41–42). This appears to be, in fact, a fundamental premise in this book, with the implication that public policy should focus on addressing poverty rather than inequality. But suggesting that the pain associated with inequality is illegitimate is to suggest the illegitimacy of people's subjective utility preferences, a move that works to undermine the assumptions of utilitarianism itself. It seems a strange move, that is, to begin an argument effectively with the premise that people's subjective preferences are the foundation of all moral value and then subsequently to suggest that many of those subjective preferences must be altered to match the subjective preferences of the author. In this regard, although Jean-Jacques Rousseau was no utilitarian, Frankfurt would have been wise to heed the Genevan's advice to "take men as they are, and the laws as they can be." This would have at least rendered him a more consistent utilitarian.

This nod to Rousseau also suggests greater problems with Frankfurt's treatment of inequality that extend beyond an inconsistent use of his own meta-ethics. Beyond Lerner's narrow utilitarian argument for equality, Frankfurt fails to engage any of the other major arguments for addressing inequality that can be found in the philosophical tradition from Plato forward. It was Plato's Athenian Stranger in the *Laws*, for example, who characterized economic inequality as the "greatest of all Plagues," since inequality is the primary source of factionalization and political instability. Variants of this argument inform Aristotle, Augustine, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, and even Adam Smith. Often cited as a proto-champion for the market society that produces radical inequality today, Smith is particularly compelling in outlining the damaging effects of economic inequality in his *Wealth of Nations*—insofar as it creates parallel moral universes in which the wealthy escape moral judgment and the poor are mercilessly punished for meager vices.

To be fair, despite Frankfurt's repeated assertions that economic inequality is not morally problematic in itself, he acknowledges that it possesses a kind of "almost irresistible tendency to generate unacceptable inequalities of other kinds," culminating in its capacity to "undermine the integrity of our commitment to democracy"—a tendency that "must be controlled" (p. x). But such statements in this book are typically fleeting, undefended, and unelaborated. In fact, in the context of his larger argument that inequality is morally unproblematic, they raise more concerns than they assuage. If the inevitable result of economic inequality is the kind of problems he acknowledges, then why dedicate so much space to arguing that inequality is morally unproblematic? Surely, the more pressing questions he might have addressed here would include: a) How does a morally unproblematic state of affairs become so problematic? And b) what can be done about those resulting problems?

What, then, might be the actual purpose of this book? Frankfurt's purpose seems to be to outline what he regards as a notable analytic distinction between the moral status of inequality itself and that of its effects. Yet if he understands the consequence of inequality to be an "almost irresistible tendency to generate unacceptable inequalities of other kinds," then it is a distinction without much of a difference. It would be as if one were writing a book on the Ebola virus with the thesis that the virus is unproblematic when detached from its biological host. One can certainly make this claim, but that would fail to grasp both its potency and its reasons for sustaining public interest. Indeed, why would anyone read a book with such a thesis?

Beyond questions concerning Frankfurt's actual intentions, one should also ask how *his audience* might read this book. To be sure, there are some who would like to believe that inequality is unproblematic because it either confirms their worldviews or because it conforms to their interest in acquiring greater wealth at the expense of others. Such readers—probably not professional philosophers—would take great comfort in an esteemed philosopher's assurances that there is nothing inherently wrong in their actions. Indeed, popular reviews of his book confirm this, making much of his claim that inequality is morally irrelevant in itself and that nothing at all is inevitable about its connection to other serious moral and political problems (e.g., Will, Carter).

It might seem unfair to hold Frankfurt accountable for his audience. But this book has been clearly written and marketed to appeal to a broad audience of non-philosophers—the kind of people who may not readily distinguish between something's inherent moral value and its necessary effects. He should know better than to facilitate the deployment of his arguments by the "excessively affluent" who are "guilty of a kind of economic gluttony" (p. 4) and

their enablers. To the extent that such people might use his arguments to confirm the moral irrelevance of their own “natural selfishness and rapacity,” to borrow a phrase from Adam Smith, it is more than fair to hold him accountable.

***Inequality: What Can Be Done?*** By Anthony Atkinson. 2015. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 400p. \$29.95. doi:10.1017/S1537592716000451

— Larry M. Bartels, *Vanderbilt University*

If there is any justice in the world, it won't be long before a Nobel Prize is awarded for research on economic inequality. When that happens, the name that belongs at the top of the recipient list is Sir Tony Atkinson's. At a time when Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez were still in diapers, Atkinson was producing sophisticated, painstaking empirical analyses of economic inequality—and arguing perceptively, even passionately, for the importance of the topic in a discipline that, for most of his long career, considered it unfashionable and perhaps faintly subversive. (As recently as 2003, one Nobel-winning economist argued: “Of the tendencies that are harmful to sound economics, the most seductive, and in my opinion the most poisonous, is to focus on questions of distribution.”)

*Inequality: What Can Be Done?* is much more than a retrospective on Atkinson's long, distinguished career. It is a serious and impressively accessible attempt to translate what economists know about “questions of distribution” into a concrete policy agenda aimed at significantly reducing economic inequality. One need not agree with Atkinson's egalitarian goals to learn a great deal from his book about economics and economic policy issues.

The first section of the book provides a nuanced “diagnosis” of economic inequality drawing upon the copious historical data generated by Atkinson and others for a wide variety of countries. It is good to be reminded of the complexities of measurement underlying the economic data that political scientists often use without much thought. Wages, household income, and wealth are not interchangeable. Top shares do not always track broader measures of inequality such as Gini coefficients. And the overall increase in economic inequality in the post-war era has seen important exceptions, including much of Europe in the 1960s and 1970s and Latin America in the 21st century.

The downside of this careful, nuanced review of trends is that readers who do not already share Atkinson's concern about rising inequality may fail to see what he calls the “Inequality Turn” for the trees, and thus fail to appreciate the force of the moral imperative animating his policy prescriptions. Students, especially, might be better served by a treatment that emphasized the magnitude and

implications of the overall increase in inequality before plunging into so much empirical detail.

Atkinson argues, as a growing number of economists and political scientists in the past decade have, that “market incomes are not just driven by exogenous forces over which we have no control,” such as globalization and technological change. “In a market economy,” he writes, “supply and demand influence the outcome but leave space for other mechanisms,” including trade unions, labor market institutions, and “entitlement rules,” to reduce inequality—or not (p. 110). Atkinson's aim is to show how policy-makers might exploit that space to make a perceptible dent in inequality in the United Kingdom, the United States, and other affluent countries.

The middle section of the book offers fifteen “proposals for action” (plus some additional “ideas to pursue”) to reduce the extent of economic inequality in affluent capitalist systems. Some are standard left-wing fare, such as more progressive taxation, extensions of social insurance programs, and increased attention to the pernicious consequences of means-tested benefit programs on effective marginal tax rates for the working poor. Others are less familiar, such as a national pay policy including a “code of practice” regulating pay gradients (albeit on a “voluntary” basis) and a technology policy “encouraging innovation in a form that increases the employability of workers and emphasizes the human dimension of service provision” (p. 237).

The concrete details of Atkinson's more controversial proposals are mostly left to be worked out by a “Social and Economic Council” of the sort already in place in several European countries, though not in the United States or the United Kingdom. The Council, Atkinson says, should be “representative in terms of gender, ethnicity, and generations” and “multipartite, including non-governmental bodies and consumer groups, as well as the standard three parties of employers, unions, and government” (p. 131).

When Atkinson argues for “a society-wide approach to earnings determination . . . which does not let incomes be determined purely by market forces” (p. 147), he imagines that that approach will be worked out in a “national conversation” involving all stakeholders that could ideally take place at the Social and Economic Council.” Similarly, the Council should devise the “pay code” restricting top incomes and ensuring that “people are being paid equally for equal value” (pp. 151–154) and set a government-guaranteed real rate of return for small savers (p. 169).

As an abstract matter of procedural democracy, a “national conversation” sounds like a very nice thing. However, Atkinson provides no evidence—and I know of none—suggesting that such a conversation would actually result in policies anything like those he advocates. In the United States, the most substantial assault on economic inequality in recent decades was the Affordable Care Act, which imposed substantial new taxes on affluent