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economic equality as a moral ideal

First man: “How are your children?”
Second man: “Compared to what?”

I

1. In a recent State of the Union address, President Barack Obama declared that income inequality is “the defining challenge of our time.” It seems to me, however, that our most fundamental challenge is not the fact that the incomes of Americans are widely *unequal*. It is, rather, the fact that too many of our people are *poor*.

Inequality of incomes might be decisively eliminated, after all, just by arranging that all incomes be *equally below* the poverty line. Needless to say, that way of achieving equality of incomes—by making everyone equally poor—has very little to be said for it. Accordingly, to eliminate income inequality cannot be, as such, our most fundamental goal.

2. In addition to the incidence of poverty, another part of our current economic disorder is that while many of our people have too little, quite a number of others have too much. The very rich have, indisputably, a great deal more than they need in order to live active, productive, and comfortable lives. In extracting from the economic wealth of the nation much more than they require in order to live well, those who are excessively affluent are guilty of a kind of economic gluttony. This resembles the gluttony of those who gobble down considerably more food than they need for either their nutritional well-being or a satisfying level of gastronomic enjoyment.

Apart from harmful psychological and moral effects upon the lives of the gluttons themselves, economic gluttony presents a ridiculous and disgusting spectacle. Taken together with the adjacent spectacle of a sizable class of people who endure significant eco-

nomic deprivation, and who are as a consequence more or less impotent, the general impression given by our economic arrangements is both ugly and morally offensive.[1]

3. To focus on inequality, which is not in itself objectionable, is to misconstrue the challenge we actually face. Our basic focus should be on reducing both poverty and excessive affluence. That may very well entail, of course, a reduction of inequality. But the reduction of inequality cannot itself be our most essential ambition. Economic equality is not a morally compelling ideal. The primary goal of our efforts must be to repair a society in which many have far too little, while others have the comfort and influence that go with having more than enough.

Those who are much better off have a serious advantage over those who are less affluent—an advantage that they may tend to exploit in pursuing inappropriate influence over electoral and regulatory processes. The potentially antidemocratic effects of this advantage must be dealt with, accordingly, by legislation and regulation designed to protect these processes from distortion and abuse.

4. Economic egalitarianism is, as I shall understand it, the doctrine that it is desirable for everyone to have the same amounts of income and of wealth (for short, "money").[2] Hardly anyone would deny that there are situations in which it makes sense to deviate from this standard: for instance, where opportunities to earn exceptional compensation must be offered in order to recruit employees with skills that are badly needed but uncommon. However, despite a readiness to agree that some inequalities are permissible, many people believe that economic equality has, in itself, considerable moral value. They urge that

efforts to approach the egalitarian ideal should therefore be accorded a significant priority.[3]

In my opinion, this is a mistake. Economic equality is not, as such, of any particular moral importance; and by the same token, economic inequality is not in itself morally objectionable. From the point of view of morality, it is not important that everyone should have *the same*. What is morally important is that each should have *enough*. If everyone had enough money, it would be of no special or deliberate concern whether some people had more money than others.

I shall call this alternative to egalitarianism the "doctrine of sufficiency"—that is, the doctrine that what is morally important with regard to money is that everyone should have enough.[4]

5. The fact that economic equality is not in its own right a morally compelling social

ideal is in no way, of course, a reason for regarding it as being, in all contexts, an unimportant or an inappropriate goal. Indeed, economic equality may have very significant political or social value. There may be quite good reasons to deal according to an egalitarian standard with problems having to do with the distribution of money. Hence it may at times make sense to be more immediately concerned with attempting to increase the extent of economic equality than with trying to regulate the extent to which everyone has enough money.

Even if economic equality itself and as such is not important, commitment to an egalitarian economic policy might be indispensable for promoting the attainment of various desirable social and political ends. Also, the most feasible approach to reaching universal economic sufficiency might actually turn out to be, in fact, a pursuit of equality. That eco-

nomic equality is not a good in itself leaves open the possibility, obviously, that it may be instrumentally valuable as a necessary condition for the attainment of goods that do genuinely possess intrinsic value.

So a more egalitarian distribution of money would certainly not be objectionable. Nevertheless, the widespread error of believing that there are powerful moral reasons for caring about economic equality for its own sake is far from innocuous. As a matter of fact, this belief tends to do significant harm.

6. It is often argued as an objection to economic egalitarianism that there is a dangerous conflict between equality and liberty. The argument rests on the assumption that if people are left freely to themselves, there will inevitably be a tendency for inequalities of income and wealth to develop. From this assumption, it is inferred that an egalitarian distribution

of money can be achieved and sustained only at the cost of repressing liberties that are indispensable to the development of that undesired tendency.

Whatever may be the merit of this argument concerning the relationship between equality and liberty, economic egalitarianism engenders another conflict, of more fundamental significance. To the extent that people are preoccupied with economic equality, under the mistaken assumption that it is a morally important good, their readiness to be satisfied with some particular level of income or wealth is—to that extent—not guided by their own most distinctive interests and ambitions. Instead, it is guided just by the quantity of money that other people happen to have.

In this way, economic egalitarianism distracts people from calculating their monetary requirements in the light of their own personal circumstances and needs. Rather, it encourages

them to aim, misguidedly, at a level of affluence measured by a calculation in which—apart from their relative monetary situation—the specific features of their own lives play no part.

But, surely, the amount of money available to various others has nothing directly to do with *what is needed for the kind of life a person would most sensibly and appropriately seek for himself*. Thus a preoccupation with the alleged inherent value of economic equality tends to divert a person's attention away from trying to discover—within his experience of himself and of his life conditions—what he himself really cares about, what he truly desires or needs, and what will actually satisfy him.

That is to say, 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, in other words, 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.

7. To be sure, noticing the economic circumstances of others may make a person aware of interesting possibilities. Furthermore it may provide data for useful judgments concerning what is normal or typical. A person who is attempting to reach a confident and realistic appreciation of what to seek for himself may well find this helpful.

Moreover, it is not only in suggestive and preliminary ways such as those that the economic situations of other people may be pertinent to someone's efforts to decide what

monetary ambitions it would be most suitable for him to entertain. The amount of money someone requires may depend in a more direct way on the amounts of money that are available to others. Comparatively large amounts of money may—as is well known—bring exceptional power, or prestige, or other competitive advantages. Therefore, a calculation of how much money would be enough for a person cannot intelligently be made, if that person is likely to be engaged in a pertinent variety of competition, without consideration of how much money is likely to be available to those with whom the person may be required to compete.

The false belief that economic equality is important for its own sake leads people to separate the problem of estimating their proper monetary ambitions from the problem of understanding what is most fundamentally significant to themselves. It influences them to take too seriously, as though it were a matter of great moral concern, a question that is inherently rather insignificant and not directly to the point—namely, the question of how their economic status compares with the economic status of others. In this way the doctrine of equality contributes to the moral disorientation and shallowness of our time.

8. The prevalence of egalitarian thought is damaging in another way as well. It not only tends to divert the attention of people from considerations that are of greater moral or human importance to them than the question of economic equality. It also diverts the attention of intellectuals from the quite fundamental philosophical problems of understanding just what those more important considerations are, and of elaborating—in appropriately comprehensive and perspicuous detail—a con-

ceptual apparatus that might reliably guide and facilitate their inquiries.

Calculating the size of an *equal share* of something is generally much easier—a more straightforward and well-defined task—than determining how much a person needs of it in order to have enough. The very concept of having an *equal* share is itself considerably more transparent and intelligible than the concept of having *enough*. A theory of equality is much easier to articulate, accordingly, than a theory of sufficiency. The widespread appeal of economic egalitarianism has, unfortunately, masked the importance of systematic inquiry into the analytical and theoretical issues raised by the concept of *having enough*. Needless to say, it is far from self-evident precisely what the doctrine of sufficiency means, and what applying it entails. But this is hardly a good reason for adopting, in preference to it, an alternative that is incorrect.

II

9. 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 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 rea-

sons 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.

10. A rather different kind of argument for economic equality comes closer to regarding the value of that equality as being intrinsic. The argument—promulgated most notably by Professor Abba Lerner (of Columbia, the University of California–Berkeley, and the New School for Social Research)—is grounded on the principle of *diminishing marginal utility*. This principle of economics implies, it is maintained, that an equal distribution of money maximizes *aggregate utility*—the aggregated satisfactions of the members of society. That

is to say, given the total amount of money in a society, the aggregate utility provided by that money would be greater if the money were distributed equally than if it were distributed unequally.[5]

The argument depends on two assumptions: (a) for each individual, the utility of money invariably diminishes at the margin; and (b) with respect to money, or with respect to the things money can buy, the utility functions of all individuals are the same.[6]

Given the assumption both of (a) and of (b), it follows that a marginal dollar always brings less utility to a rich person than it would bring to a person who is less affluent.

This may appear to entail, further, that aggregate utility must increase when inequality is reduced by giving a dollar to someone who is less affluent than the person from whom it is taken, for the utility the recipient will ac-

quire from the transfer will exceed the utility the donor will lose.

11. This further reasoning fails to take into account, however, the inflationary effect that is likely to be caused by taking money from the rich and giving it to the poor.[7] The supply of goods available for consumption does not increase, after all, when money is redistributed. On the other hand, the demand for certain goods by people who were formerly too poor to afford them is very likely to increase. Thus prices of those goods will probably rise.

This inflationary pressure will entail a corresponding reduction of consumption, perhaps not by the very rich—who will still have plenty of money with which to cope with the price increases—but by members of an intermediate class, who will be unable to maintain their accustomed level of consumption in the face of higher prices. The reduction of their standard of living will tend to offset the gain made by the formerly poor. This trade-off will mean that aggregate utility does not increase. The aggregate of utility cannot reliably be increased, then, by taking money from the rich and giving it to the poor.

12. In any event, the fact is that both (a) and (b) are false. In virtue of their falsity, the reasoning that links economic equality to the maximization of aggregate utility does not even get off the ground. The argument from diminishing marginal utility fails to render the desirability of redistributing money at all plausible.

So far as concerns (b), it is evident that the utility functions for money of different individuals are not even approximately alike. Some people suffer from physical, mental, or emotional weaknesses or incapacities that limit the

levels of satisfaction they are able to enjoy. In addition to the effects of specific disabilities, some people simply enjoy things more heartily than other people do. Everyone knows that, at any given level of consumption, there are large differences in the utility derived by different consumers.

So far as concerns (a), there are strong reasons for not expecting any general decline in the marginal utility of money. That the marginal utilities of certain goods do indeed tend to diminish is clearly not an a priori principle of reason. It is a psychological generalization, based on the fact that our senses characteristically lose their freshness as a consequence of repetitive stimulation: after a time, people tend to be satiated with what they have been consuming. It is common knowledge that experiences of many kinds become increasingly routine and unrewarding as they are repeated.[8]

It is questionable, however, whether this provides any reason at all for expecting a diminution in the marginal utility of money—that is, of something that functions as a generic instrument of exchange. Even if the utility of everything money can buy were inevitably to diminish at the margin, the utility of money itself might nonetheless exhibit a different pattern. It is quite possible that money would be exempt from the phenomenon of unrelenting marginal decline, because of its limitless versatility.

From the supposition that a person tends to lose interest in what he is consuming as his consumption of it increases, it cannot be concluded that he must also tend to lose interest in consumption itself, or in the money that makes consumption possible. No matter how tired he has become of what he has been doing, there may always remain for him untried goods to be enjoyed, and, even if the

availability of untried goods is finite and becomes exhausted, there may be further satisfaction to be derived from goods of which he was once but is no longer sated, and whose utility for him has thus been revived.

13. In any case, there are numerous things of which people do not, from the very outset, immediately begin to tire. From certain goods, in fact, people derive more utility after sustained consumption than they can derive at first. There are circumstances in which appreciating or enjoying something actually depends on repeated trials having been already accomplished. Those trials serve as a kind of "warming up" process—an introduction that prepares a person for being able to derive a satisfaction he is otherwise unable to reach.

This is the situation whenever relatively little gratification is received, from the item or experience in question, until the individual has warmed up, or has acquired a "special taste" for it, or has become addicted to it, or has in some other way begun to respond fulsomely to it. The capacity for obtaining gratification is then smaller at earlier points in the sequence of consumption than it is at later points. In such instances, marginal utility does not decline. It actually increases.

Suppose it were true of everything, without exception, that a person will ultimately lose interest in it. This would mean that there is a point in every utility curve at which the curve begins a steady and irreversible decline. It cannot be presumed, however, that every segment of the curve must have a downward slope.

III

14. When marginal utility diminishes, it does not do so on account of any deficiency in the marginal unit. It diminishes just in virtue of the position of that unit as the latest in a sequence. The same is true when marginal utility increases: the marginal unit has greater utility than its predecessors precisely on account of the consumer's earlier consumption of the latter.

When the sequence consists of units of money, what corresponds to the process of *warming up*—at least, in one pertinent and important feature—is the process of *saving*. Accumulating savings entails, as warming up also does, generating a capacity to derive, at some subsequent point, gratifications that are not derivable earlier.

It may at times be especially worthwhile for a person to save money, rather than to spend each dollar as it comes along, in virtue of the incidence of what may be thought of as utility "thresholds." Consider an item with the following characteristics: it is not fungible, it can provide a fresh and otherwise unobtainable type of satisfaction, and it is too expensive to be acquired except by saving up for it. The utility of the dollar that finally completes a program of saving up for such an item may be greater than the utility of any dollar saved earlier in the program. It may even be greater than their combined utilities, when the utility provided by acquiring the last item is greater than the utilities that could have been derived if the money saved had been spent as it came in. In such a situation, the final dollar saved permits the crossing of a utility threshold. It does not merely add another unit of utility to the others. It creates a utility that encompasses the others and that is greater than their sum.

15. People tend to think that it is generally more important for them to avoid a certain degree of harm than to acquire a benefit of comparable magnitude. It may be that this preference is in part due to an assumption that

utility usually does diminish at the margin. For, on that assumption, the additional benefit provided by the marginal acquisition would have less utility than is provided by the item that would be lost by the harm.

It is interesting to note, however, that the tendency to place a lower value on acquiring benefits than on avoiding harms is sometimes reversed. When people are so miserable that they regard themselves as "having nothing to lose," they may well place a higher value on improving their condition than on avoiding the harm of becoming (to a comparable degree) even worse off. In that case, what is diminishing at the margin is not the utility of benefits but the disutility of harms.

In virtue of utility thresholds, an incremental or marginal dollar may have conspicuously greater utility than dollars that do not enable a threshold to be crossed. For example, a person who uses his spare money during a certain period for an inconsequential improvement in his routine pattern of consumption—perhaps, let us say, a slightly and almost imperceptibly better quality of meat for dinner every night—may derive much less additional utility in this way than by saving up the spare money for a while and then going to see an exciting ball game.

16. It is sometimes argued that, for anyone who is rational in the sense that he seeks to maximize the utility generated by his expenditures, the marginal utility of money must necessarily diminish. Professor Abba Lerner presents this argument as follows:

> The principle of diminishing marginal utility of income can be derived from the assumption that consumers spend their income in the way that maximizes the satisfaction they can derive from the good obtained. With a given income, all the things bought give a greater satisfaction for the money spent on them than any of the other things that could have been bought in their place but were not bought for this very reason. From this it follows that if income were greater the additional things that would be bought with the increment of income would be things that are rejected when income is smaller because they give less satisfaction; and if income were greater still, even less satisfactory things could be bought. The greater the income, the less satisfactory are the additional things that can be bought with equal increases of income. That is all that is meant by the principle of the diminishing marginal utility of income.[9]

I believe that this argument is unsound. The level of satisfaction a person can derive from a certain good may vary considerably according to whether or not he also possesses certain other goods. The satisfaction obtainable from a given expenditure may therefore be enhanced if some other expenditure has already been made.

Suppose, for instance, that a serving of popcorn costs the same as enough butter to make the popcorn delectable. Now imagine a rational consumer, who adores buttered popcorn, who gets very little satisfaction from unbuttered popcorn, but who nonetheless prefers unbuttered popcorn to butter alone. This consumer will buy the unbuttered popcorn in preference to the butter alone, accordingly, if he must buy one or the other and cannot buy both.

Now suppose that this person's income increases, so that he can now buy both the popcorn and the butter as well. Then he can have something he enjoys enormously: his incre-

mental income makes it possible for him to enjoy the buttered popcorn he adores. The satisfaction he will derive by combining the popcorn and the butter may very likely be much greater than the sum of the satisfactions he would be able to derive from the two goods taken separately. Here, again, is a threshold effect.

17. The threshold effect is particularly integral to the experience of collectors. When a collector obtains the item that finally completes a collection on which he has been working for years, he may quite naturally derive a satisfaction greater than that which he has derived from obtaining any (or all) of the other items in the collection, even if—taken by itself—that last item has no greater utility than does any of the other items.

Obtaining the final item may often entail, for a collector, crossing a utility threshold. A complete collection consisting of twenty items, each of which has the same utility when the items are considered individually, may have greater utility for the collector than an incomplete collection that is of the same size but that includes duplicates. This is because the completeness of the collection itself provides an additional utility acquired as the threshold is crossed—a utility that is in addition to the utility provided by the individual items of which the collection is composed.

In a case of this sort, it is not true that the marginal utility of the money the person uses to acquire $G(i)$ (the good he is able finally to acquire with the increased income) is less than the marginal utility of the money he used to acquire $G(n)$ (the goods that the rational consumer actually buys with his income of n dollars). When there is an opportunity to create a combination 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, the marginal utility of money may not decline even though the sequence of marginal items—taking each of these items exclusively by itself—may exhibit a pattern of declining utilities.

Lerner's argument is flawed in virtue of another consideration as well. It evidently presumes that what the consumer buys when his income is increased by i dollars must be something he could have bought earlier but rejected when his income was only n dollars. However, this presumption is unwarranted.

With an income of $(n + i)$ dollars, the consumer might use that income to obtain something too expensive for him to have afforded before his income increased. If a rational consumer with an income of n dollars defers obtaining a certain good until his income increases, this does not necessarily mean that he "rejected" obtaining it when his income was smaller. The good in question may have been out of his reach at that time simply because adding it to his other goods would have cost more than *n* dollars. His reason for postponing obtaining the item may have had nothing to do with comparative expectations of satisfaction, or with preferences or priorities at all.[10]

IV

18. The preceding discussion has established that an egalitarian distribution of income may fail to maximize aggregate utility. As a matter of fact, it can also be shown that there are conditions under which an egalitarian distribution actually minimizes aggregate utility.[11]

Thus suppose that there is enough of a certain resource (medicine, say, or food) to enable some but not all members of a population to survive. Let us stipulate that the size of

the population is ten, that a person needs at least five units of the resource in question in order to stay alive, and that exactly forty units of the resource are available. At most, then, eight people can survive; and they can survive just by receiving a greater share of the essential resource than is received by the two individuals who will be left to die.

If any members of this population are to survive, then, some must have more than others. An equal distribution, which gives each person four units, leads to the worst possible outcome: namely, everyone dies. It would be morally grotesque, in a case of this sort, to insist that resources be shared equally!

It would also be unreasonable to maintain that, under the conditions specified, it is justifiable for some to be better off only—as some philosophers would claim—when this is in the interests of the worst off. Suppose that the available resources are sensibly distributed in such a way as to save eight people. The justification for doing this would obviously not rest on a belief that it somehow benefits the two members of the population who are left to die. Under conditions of exigent scarcity, when there is not enough to meet everyone's minimal requirements, the desirability of an egalitarian distribution may be quite out of the question.

19. Another response to scarcity is to distribute the available resources in such a way that as many people as possible have enough, or, in other words, that the distribution maximizes the incidence of sufficiency. But now suppose that, in the same example, there are available not just forty units of the vital resource but forty-one. Then, maximizing the incidence of sufficiency by providing enough for each of eight people leaves one unit unallocated. What should be done with this extra unit?

It has been shown above that it is a mistake to insist that, where some people have less than enough, no one should have more than anyone else: when resources are scarce, so that it is impossible for everyone to have enough, an egalitarian distribution may lead to disaster. It is also a mistake to claim that where some people have less than enough, no one should have more than enough. If this claim were correct, then—in the example at hand—the extra unit should not be used to provide more than enough to one of the people who otherwise has exactly enough to survive, but should be provided to one of the two people who have nothing.

The trouble with this alternative, clearly, is that one additional unit of the resource in question will not improve the condition of a person who has none. By hypothesis, that person will die even if given the extra unit. He does not need one unit. He needs five.[12] So the extra unit is of no particular use either to him or, in the circumstances, to anyone else. It might just as well simply be kept in reserve, or thrown away; or it might be given, in a supererogatory gesture, to one of the people who is already destined to survive.

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. Having the larger amount may even make a person worse off. 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.

20. The idea that nobody should have more than enough while anybody has less than enough derives its plausibility from an assumption that is also plausible but that is nonetheless false: to wit, giving resources to people who have less than enough necessarily makes those people better off. It is indeed generally reasonable to assign a higher priority to improving the condition of those who are in need than to improving the condition of those who are not in any need. But giving additional resources to people who have less than enough of those resources, and who on that account are in serious need, may not actually improve the condition of those people at all.

It is important to notice that people who are below a certain utility threshold are not necessarily benefited by additional resources that move them closer to that threshold. What is crucial for them is to cross the threshold. Merely moving closer to it may fail to be of any help to them, or it may actually be disadvantageous.

By no means do I wish to suggest, of course, that it is never or only rarely beneficial to move closer to an important utility threshold without actually crossing it. It may certainly be beneficial, either because it increases the likelihood that the threshold will ultimately be crossed, or because—quite apart from the significance of crossing the threshold—additional resources may provide desirable increments of utility. Certainly, a collector may enjoy expanding his collection even if he believes that he has no chance of completing it.

V

21. Quite often, advocacy of egalitarianism is based less on an argument than on a pur-

ported moral intuition: economic inequality just seems wrong. It strikes many people as altogether apparent that, taken simply in its own right, the possession by some of more money than others is morally offensive.

I suspect that people who profess to have this intuition concerning manifestations of inequality are actually not responding to the inequality they perceive but to another feature of the situations they are observing. What I believe they find intuitively to be morally objectionable in circumstances of economic inequality is not that some of the individuals in those circumstances have less money than others. Rather, it is the fact that those with less have too little.[13]

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.

Mere differences in the amounts of money people have are not in themselves distressing. We tend to be quite unmoved, after all, by inequalities between those who are very well-to-do and those who are extremely rich. Our awareness that the latter are substantially better off than the former arouses in us no moral uneasiness at all.

If we believe of some person that his life is richly fulfilling, that he himself is genuinely content with his economic situation, and that he is not troubled by any resentments or sorrows that more money could assuage, we are not ordinarily much interested—at least, from

a moral point of view—in a comparison of the amount of money he has with the amounts possessed by others. Economic discrepancies in cases of this sort do not impress us in the least as matters of significant moral concern. The fact that some people have much less than others is not at all morally disturbing when it is clear that the worse off have plenty.

22. The doctrines of egalitarianism and of sufficiency are logically independent: considerations that support the one cannot be presumed to provide support also for the other. Yet proponents of egalitarianism frequently suppose that they have offered evidence for their position when what they have in fact offered supports only the doctrine of sufficiency.

In attempting to gain acceptance of their doctrine, egalitarians often call attention to disparities between the conditions enjoyed by the rich and those suffered by the poor. It is undeniable that contemplating such disparities does often elicit a legitimate conviction that it would be morally desirable to redistribute the available resources so as to improve the circumstances of the poor. And, of course, that would bring about a greater degree of economic equality. But the demanding moral appeal of improving the condition of the poor does not even tend to show that egalitarianism is, as a moral ideal, similarly demanding.

To show of poverty that it is compellingly undesirable does nothing whatever to show the same of inequality. What makes a person poor in the morally relevant sense—in which poverty is understood as a condition of serious economic deprivation—is not the fact of having less money than others. Situations involving inequality are morally disturbing, I believe, only to the extent that they violate the ideal of sufficiency.[14] This is confirmed, it seems to me, by familiar discrepancies between

the principles egalitarians profess and the way in which egalitarians commonly conduct their own lives.

My point here is not that some egalitarians hypocritically accept high incomes and special opportunities for which, according to the moral theories they recommend, there is no adequate justification. The point is, rather, that many egalitarians (including many academic proponents of the doctrine) are not truly concerned about whether they themselves are as well off economically as are other people.

They often believe that they have roughly enough money for what is important to them, and they are therefore not terribly preoccupied with the fact that some people are considerably more affluent than they are. Many egalitarians would consider it rather shabby or even reprehensible to care, with respect to their own lives, about economic comparisons of that sort. And, notwithstanding the implications of the doctrine to which they adhere, they would be appalled if their children grew up with such concerns.

23. The fundamental error of economic egalitarianism lies in supposing that it is morally important whether one person has less than another, regardless of how much either of them has and regardless also of how much utility each derives from what he has. This error is due in part to the mistaken assumption that someone who has a smaller income has more important unsatisfied needs than someone who is better off. Whether one person has a larger income than another is, however, an entirely extrinsic matter. It has to do with a relationship between the incomes of the two people. It is independent both of the actual sizes of their respective incomes and,

more importantly, of the amounts of satisfaction they are able to derive from them. The comparison implies nothing at all concerning whether either of the people being compared has *any* important unsatisfied needs.

VI

24. What does it mean, at last, for a person to have enough? One thing it might mean is that any more would be too much: a larger amount would make the person's life unpleasant, or it would be harmful, or in some other way unwelcome. This sense is often what people have in mind when, especially in an angry or cautionary tone, they say such things as "I've had enough!" or "Enough of that!"

The idea conveyed by statements like these is that a limit has been reached, a limit beyond which it is not desirable to advance. On the other hand, the assertion that a person has enough may entail only that a certain requirement or standard has been met, with no implication that more would be bad. This is often what a person intends when he says something like "That should be enough." Statements such as this often characterize the indicated amount as sufficient, while leaving open the possibility that more might also be acceptable.

In the doctrine of sufficiency, the use of the notion of "enough" pertains to meeting a standard rather than to reaching a limit. To say that a person has enough money means—more or less—that he is content, or that it is reasonable for him to be content, with having no more money than he actually has. And to say this is, in turn, to say that the person does not (or cannot reasonably) regard whatever (if anything) is distressing or unsatisfying in his life as being due to his having too little money. In other words, if a person is (or ought reasonably to be) content with the amount of money he has, then insofar as he is or has reason to be unhappy with the way his life is going, he does not (or cannot reasonably) suppose that more (or, conceivably, less) money would enable him to become (or to have reason to be) significantly less unhappy with it.[15]

25. It is essential to understand that having enough money is far from being equivalent to having just enough to get by, or to having enough to make life marginally tolerable. People are not generally content with living on the brink. The point of the doctrine of sufficiency is not that the only morally important distributional consideration with respect to money is whether people have enough to avoid economic misery. A person who might naturally be said to have just barely enough does not really, according to the doctrine of sufficiency, have enough at all.

There are two distinct kinds of circumstance in which the amount of money a person has is enough—that is, in which more money will not enable him to become significantly less unhappy. On the one hand, it may be that the person is not at all unhappy; he is suffering no measurable distress or dissatisfaction with his life. On the other hand, it may be that although the person is indeed unhappy with how his life is going, the difficulties that account for his unhappiness would not truly be alleviated by more money.

Circumstances of this second kind obtain when what is wrong with the person's life has to do most particularly with noneconomic goods: for example, love, a sense that life is meaningful, satisfaction with one's own character, and so on. These are goods that money cannot buy. Indeed, they are goods for which none of the things money can buy are even approximately adequate substitutes.

Sometimes, to be sure, noneconomic goods are obtainable or enjoyable only (or more easily) by someone who has a certain amount of money. But the person who is distressed with his life may already have that much money. Since the unsatisfactory character of his life is not due to the size of his income or his wealth, his life would not be improved if he had more money.

It is possible that someone who is content with the amount of money he has might also be content with an even larger amount of money. Since having a large enough income does not mean being at a limit beyond which an income of a larger magnitude would necessarily be undesirable, it would be a mistake to assume that for a person who already has enough money the marginal utility of money must be either negative or zero.

Although this person is by hypothesis not distressed about his life on account of any lack of things that a larger income would enable him to obtain, it nonetheless remains possible that he would enjoy having some of those things. They would not make him less unhappy; nor would they in any way alter his attitude toward his life, or the degree of his contentment with it. However, they might bring him pleasure. If that is so, then his life would in that respect be better with more money than without it. The marginal utility for him of money would accordingly remain positive.

To say that a person is content with the amount of money he has does not entail, then, that there would be no point in providing him with more. A person who already has enough money might be quite pleased to accept a larger income. From the premise that a person is content with the amount of money he has, it cannot be inferred that he would not prefer to have more. It is even possible that he

would actually be prepared to sacrifice certain things that he values (e.g., a certain amount of leisure) for the sake of more money.

26. But how can this be compatible with saying that the person is actually content with what he has? What does contentment with a given amount of money preclude, if it does not preclude being ready to make measurable sacrifices in order to obtain more?

What it precludes is having an active interest in getting more. A contented person regards having more money as inessential to his being satisfied with his life.

The fact that he is content is quite consistent with his recognizing that his economic circumstances could be improved, and that his life might as a consequence become better than it is. But this possibility is not important to him. He is simply not much interested in being, so far as money goes, better off than he is. His attention is not vividly engaged by the goods that would be available to him if he had more money. Those goods do not arouse in him any particularly eager or restless concern, although he does acknowledge that he would enjoy additional goods if he had them.

In any event, let us suppose that the level of satisfaction his present monetary circumstances enable him to attain is sufficient to meet his reasonable expectations of life. This is not fundamentally a matter of how much utility or satisfaction his various activities and experiences provide. It is more a matter of his attitude toward being provided with that much. The satisfying experience a person enjoys is one thing. Whether he is satisfied that his life includes just so much satisfaction is another.

Although it is possible that other feasibly attainable circumstances would provide him with greater satisfaction, it may be that he is

wholly satisfied with the level of satisfaction he now enjoys. Even if he knows that he could quite possibly obtain even greater satisfaction overall, he does not feel the uneasiness or the ambition that would incline him to seek it. There are quite reasonable people who feel that their lives are good enough, and that it is not important to them whether their lives are as good as possible.[16]

The fact that a person lacks an active interest in getting something does not mean, of course, that he prefers not to have it. The contented person may without any incoherence accept or welcome improvements in his situation; and he may even be prepared to incur minor costs in order to improve it. The fact that he is contented means only that the possibility of improving his situation is not important to him. In other words, it implies only that he 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.

27. It may seem that there can be no reasonable basis for accepting less satisfaction when one could have more. It may seem, accordingly, that rationality itself entails maximizing, and hence that a person who declines to maximize the level of satisfaction in his life is not being rational. Needless to say, such a person cannot offer as his reason for declining to pursue greater satisfaction an expectation that the costs of that pursuit are likely to be too high; for if that were his reason, then he would be attempting to maximize satisfaction after all. But what other good reason could he possibly have for passing up opportunities for more satisfaction?

In fact, he may have a very good reason for doing so: namely, that he is satisfied with the

level of satisfaction he already has. Being satisfied with how things are is clearly an excellent reason for having no great interest in changing them. A person who is satisfied with his life as it is can hardly be criticized, accordingly, on the grounds that he has no good reason for declining to make it better.

Perhaps he might still be open to criticism, on the ground that he should not be satisfied—that it is somehow unreasonable, or unseemly, or in some other mode improper or wrong for him to be satisfied with less satisfaction than he could have. But on what basis could this criticism be justified?

Suppose that a man deeply and happily loves a woman who is altogether worthy. We would not ordinarily criticize the man in such a case just because we thought he might have done even better. Moreover, our sense that it would be inappropriate to criticize him for that reason need not be due simply to a belief that holding out for a more desirable or worthier woman might end up costing him too much.

Rather, it may reflect our recognition that the desire to be happy or content or satisfied with life is a desire for a satisfactory level of satisfaction, and that it is not inherently tantamount to a desire that the level of satisfaction be maximized. Being satisfied with a state of affairs is not equivalent to preferring it to all other possibilities. If someone is faced with an immediate choice between less and more of something he regards as desirable, then perhaps it would be irrational for him to prefer the less to the more. But a person may be satisfied with a given state of affairs without having made any such comparisons.

It is not necessarily irrational or unreasonable for a person to omit or to decline making comparisons between his own circumstances and possible alternatives. This is not only because making such comparisons may be costly. It is also because if someone is satisfied with the way things are, he may have no reasonable motive to consider how they might be otherwise.[17]

28. To be sure, contentment may in some individuals be a function of excessive dullness or diffidence. The fact that a person is free both of resentment and of ambition may be due to his having a slavish character, or it may be due to his vitality being muffled by a kind of negligent lassitude. It is possible for someone to be content merely, as it were, by default.

But a person who is content with resources providing less satisfaction than he could reasonably expect to have may not be irresponsible, or indolent, or deficient in imagination. On the contrary, his decision to be content with his actual resources—in other words, to adopt an attitude of willing acceptance of the fact that he has just that much—may be based upon a conscientiously intelligent and penetrating evaluation of the actual circumstances and quality of his life.

It is not essential for such an evaluation to include an *extrinsic* comparison of the person's circumstances with alternatives to which he might plausibly aspire, as would be necessary if contentment were reasonable only when based upon a judgment that the enjoyment of possible benefits has been maximized. A person may be less interested in whether his circumstances enable him to live as well as possible than he is in whether they enable him to live satisfyingly.

In that case, he may appropriately devote his evaluation entirely to an *intrinsic* appraisal of his life. He may then recognize that his circumstances do not lead him to be resentful

or regretful or moved to change, and that—on the basis of his understanding of himself and of what is important to him—he accedes approvingly to a readiness to be content with the way things are. The situation in that event is not so much that he rejects the possibility of improving his circumstances because he thinks there is nothing genuinely to be gained by attempting to improve them. It is rather that this possibility, however feasible it may be, fails as a matter of fact to excite his active attention or to command from him any lively interest.

People often adjust their intentions and their desires to their circumstances. There is a danger that sheer discouragement, or an interest in avoiding frustration and conflict, may lead them to settle for too little. It surely cannot be presumed that someone's life is genuinely fulfilling, or that it is reasonable for the person to be satisfied with it, simply because he is not inclined to complain. On the other hand, it also 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.