How the Sufficiency Minimum Becomes a Social Maximum

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This article argues that, under likely empirical conditions, sufficientarianism leads not to an easily achievable duty to maintain a social minimum but to the onerous duty of maintaining a social maximum at the sufficiency level. This happens because sufficientarians ask us to give no weight at all to small benefits for people above the sufficiency level if the alternative is to relieve the suffering of people below it. If we apply this judgment in a world where there are rare diseases and hard-to-prevent accidents that cause people to fall below the sufficiency threshold, all of our discretionary spending will have to be devoted to bringing harder and harder cases up to sufficiency. Nothing will be left for anyone to consume above the sufficiency level.

Sufficientarianism can be understood to include both a positive and a negative thesis.[1] The positive thesis stresses that 'at least some priority should be given to helping people who are badly-off [in an absolute sense]'.[2] The negative thesis denies the importance of any other inequalities, or at least it denies that trivial benefits for those who are well-off should ever be preferred to a significant benefit for those who are badly-off – no matter the size of the groups involved. One attractive feature of sufficientarianism is that it seems to imply we have a strong but easily achievable distributional responsibility. Apparently, once we establish a social minimum at the sufficiency level, we can pursue other goals without worrying about any other inequalities.

This article argues that – under likely empirical conditions – the negative thesis is incompatible with that attractive feature; any sufficiency principle that ignores trivial benefits to the well-off implies not that there is an easily achievable social *minimum* but that there is an onerous social *maximum* at the sufficiency level. This article demonstrates that once the sufficiency level is reached for most people, the rest of social resources must necessarily go toward bring harder and harder cases to the sufficiency level rather than allowing others to enjoy welfare above it.

[1] Paula Casal, 'Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough', *Ethics* 117 (2007), pp. 296–326, esp. pp. 299–303.

[2] Yitzhak Benbaji, 'The Doctrine of Sufficiency: A Defense', *Utilitas* 17 (2005), pp. 310–32, esp. p. 311.

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This article takes issue only with the negative thesis, not with the positive thesis. Several sufficientarians have endorsed versions of the negative thesis.[3] Roger Crisp, for example, argues that any weight at all put on benefits to those who are already well-off is too much weight.[4] Yitzhak Benbaji argues that the size of a benefit matters more than the number of people who experience it.[5]

Crisp explains this intuition with an example involving chocolates for the well-off. Suppose society has a certain amount of additional resources that can either relieve the pain of a small group of disadvantaged people (bringing them up to sufficiency) or provide one chocolate each to a very large group of rich people (providing them with a trivial benefit). If it is better to provide significant pain relief for one person than chocolates for *any number* of people who are already well-off, then no weight at all can be placed on small amounts of consumption for the well-off, or the weight placed on benefits to additional numbers of well-off people must eventually become zero. Even if the weight placed on consumption for the well-off is extremely small, chocolates for the well-off will outweigh pain relief for the suffering whenever the number of well-off people is large enough and the number of badly-off people is small enough. Crisp and Benbaji believe this outcome is unreasonable.[6]

The complete rejection of weighting small benefits to the well-off is the most significant difference between sufficientarianism and more common approaches.[7] Some critics simply deny the intuition behind the negative thesis,[8] but this article argues that there is more to this issue than conflicting intuitions. The implausibility of the negative thesis can be demonstrated even to someone who finds the no-chocolates-for-pain-relief example initially plausible. I believe Crisp and Benbaji are misled by isolated examples that do not reveal that trivial costs and benefits necessarily add up to significant costs and benefits. We should not trust initial intuitions until we have looked at enough examples to see the full ramifications of the positions we are trying to test. This article

[3] Harry Frankfurt, 'Equality as a Moral Ideal', *Ethics* 98 (1987), pp. 21–43, esp. p. 134; Benbaji, 'A Defense', p. 310; Yitzhak Benbaji, 'Sufficiency or Priority?', *European Journal of Philosophy* 14 (2006), pp. 327–48, esp. pp. 327–8; Roger Crisp, 'Equality, Priority, and Compassion', *Ethics* 113 (2003), pp. 745–63.

[4] Crisp, 'Equality', pp. 752–4.

[5] Benbaji, 'Sufficiency', pp. 327–8.

[6] Crisp, 'Equality'; Benbaji, 'Sufficiency'.

[7] Andrew Stark, 'Benefit versus Numbers versus Helping the Worst-off: An Alternative to the Prevalent Approach to the Just Distribution of Resources', *Utilitas* 20 (2008), pp. 356–82, calls 'the prevalent approach' the joint concern with size of benefit, worse-offedness, and numbers.

[8] Richard J. Arneson, 'Distributive Justice and Basic Capability Equality: "Good Enough" Is Not Good Enough', *Capabilities Equality: Basic Issues and Problems*, ed. A. Kaufman (London, 2005).

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pushes sufficientarian examples a bit further to reveal unattractive ramifications.

To distinguish between types of examples, I define the terms 'income (in)sufficiency' and 'health-and-safety (in)sufficiency.' These names refer to causes of insufficiency. They do *not* refer to different experiences of sufficiency, which only seems to make sense if understood in terms of overall welfare or capability of experiencing welfare. People need health, safety, and income to reach sufficiency. A person has 'income insufficiency', if she does not have access to enough resources to keep her overall welfare above the sufficiency threshold (even if she is healthy and safe). A person has 'health-and-safety insufficiency', if illness, disability, accidents, and/or crime keep her overall welfare below the sufficiency threshold (even if she has access to enough resources to keep a healthy and safe person above it).

Importantly, I see no reason in the literature on sufficientarianism why health-and-safety insufficiency should be treated differently from income insufficiency. There may be reason to treat insufficiency that stems from individual choice differently from insufficiency that does not. But as long as individuals lack sufficiency for reasons beyond their own control, it would seem arbitrary to say we treat one person's income insufficiency differently from another person's health-and-safety insufficiency. With this stated, I can now demonstrate that applying sufficientarianism to health-and-safety sufficiency leads to unreasonable conclusions.

I put forward three factual hypotheses. I do not offer empirical evidence to support them, but I believe they are reasonable and uncontroversial. First, income sufficiency for healthy people is achievable. Second, health-and-safety sufficiency is not completely achievable; elimination of all the health-and-safety related causes of insufficiency is so expensive that we will not fully achieve health-and-safety sufficiency for everyone, even if we devote all available resources to it. Third, devoting more resources to health-and-safety sufficiency will relieve suffering and bring more people up to sufficiency even though it will not bring everyone to that level.

If income insufficiency were the only problem, sufficientarian justice would not be an onerous duty, but under these hypotheses health-and-safety insufficiency poses a problem. As far as we can see into the future there will be rare medical conditions that we are unable to cure or fully ameliorate. There will be accidents and crimes that push people below the sufficiency threshold and that we are unable to eliminate or fully ameliorate even if we devote our entire discretionary budget to them. If there were simply nothing we could do to reduce this

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suffering, we would have no responsibility to devote any resources to it,[9] and again sufficientarianism would not be an onerous duty. However, devoting more resources to health and safety would do a lot of good. It is likely that devoting our entire discretionary budget to the promotion of health-and-safety sufficiency will greatly reduce suffering and achieve the sufficiency threshold for people who would otherwise suffer below it. The only sacrifice will be trivial, incremental financial losses and sacrifices of convenience to people who are at or above the sufficiency level.

To see how these hypotheses play out, consider a one-mile-per-hour decrease in the speed limit. Such a policy would cause a trivial loss of convenience to those who are well-off, but it would slightly reduce the rate of accidents involving death or serious injury to innocent persons. Sufficientarians cannot speak of a 'trivial' decrease in the accident *rate* because every accident is extremely significant to the small number of people involved. It is possible that the loss of convenience caused by a decrease in the speed limit will push a few people below the sufficiency threshold, but if so, it will be in terms of income sufficiency, and we can nullify any such losses with financial compensation. We cannot similarly use financial compensation to nullify fatalities and injuries that result from automobile accidents. Therefore, we *must* lower the speed limit by this trivial increment. Once we have reduced the speed limit by one trivial increment, we must reduce it by more trivial increments until we reach one of three possible outcomes: the highways are completely safe; cars are eliminated; or a further reduction causes more people to fall below the threshold by reducing economic activity than it saves from falling below the threshold by reducing accidents (taking into account our ability to pay compensation).

Under the negative thesis, this policy is more than a good idea; it is a moral imperative. If we believe that we must never choose to promote a trivial benefit for the well-off at the expense of a significant cost to the badly-off, no matter the relative size of each group, we must eliminate automobiles and probably buses and airplanes as well. We must redesign our cities to accommodate the safest forms of transportation no matter how inconvenient and slow they may be. Every conceivable convenience must be sacrificed as long as it carries the risk of accidents causing at least one innocent person to fall below the sufficiency threshold.

Of course, everything is dangerous to some degree, but everything is not *equally* dangerous to the same degree. By sacrificing convenience,

[9] Arneson, 'Distributive Justice', p. 13.

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we can greatly reduce the risk of accidents that push people below the sufficiency threshold. By hypothesis, we will eventually sacrifice all consumption above the sufficiency level before we run out of ways to eliminate disease, disability, accidents, and crime.

Once we consider health-and-safety issues, this problem becomes apparent even in the sufficientarians' favorite example of no-chocolates-for-pain-relief. Unless and until we can find a way to transport chocolates and chocolate ingredients without any risk of accidents that cause sufficiency-threatening pain to innocent people, the entire chocolate industry violates the sufficientarians' negative thesis. If we really believe that society can never choose chocolate over pain relief, we must immediately eliminate the chocolate industry.

Under the negative thesis, any resources that now go into non-essential consumption would have to be redirected toward preventing, curing, or ameliorating rarer and rarer diseases, disabilities, crimes, or accidents. That is, if we endorse the negative thesis, and if the three empirical hypotheses are true, the sufficiency threshold will not be a social minimum but a social maximum. Sufficiency implies an extremely onerous duty. We will devote nearly the whole of our economic activity to the attainment of sufficiency for harder and harder cases, but because we will not attain it for everyone, we will have no resources left for anyone to consume above the sufficiency level.

Is there a way out for sufficientarians? There are three reasons why any way out involves at least a partial sacrifice of the negative thesis.

First, the most obvious way out would be to find a reason why the sufficiency principle applies only to income insufficiency and not to health-and-safety insufficiency, but I don't believe sufficientarians can successfully bracket such issues. That kind of strategy might work for the difference principle,[10] which would lead to similar problems if it were applied to health-and-safety issues. Rawlsians can plausibly claim that the difference principle is to be understood in terms of income and not in terms of overall welfare because it is merely a method for the distribution of the benefits of cooperation. Sufficientarians would have a more difficult time because sufficiency is clearly a welfare concept. Crisp's use of pain relief in his example indicates that we should care about health-and-safety insufficiency; anything that might cause a person to lack sufficient welfare or capability has equal importance. It doesn't make sense to say that we give absolute priority to people who have less than enough because of low income but not because of illness or injury. Similarly, the well-off individuals' demand for incentives is more difficult for sufficientarians to accept than it is for Rawlsians.

[10] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

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Left-libertarian or Dworkinian resource egalitarians have reasons to treat inequalities stemming from unequal access to resources differently from other inequalities, but I don't see how sufficientarians could do so as well and remain distinct.

Second, if sufficientarians were to bracket health and safety issues, they would be leaving out most or all of the issues in which sufficientarianism with the negative thesis implies a different answer from a version of sufficientarianism without it. By hypothesis, we can justify bringing everyone up to income sufficiency without relying on the negative thesis. If we carefully apply the negative thesis only to those issues on which it does not significantly affect our conclusions, we have effectively rejected it.

Third, why should sufficientarians want a way out? Anyone who truly believes that consumption above the sufficiency level is inconsequential for distributive justice should be willing to sacrifice all such consumption, if that is what it takes to attain sufficiency for the maximum number of people. The mere fact that one balks at a social maximum is evidence that one does not fully accept the negative thesis.

Another possible way out for sufficientarians involves multiple thresholds. Both Paula Casal and Benbaji have argued that sufficientarianism might be more plausible with more than one threshold. It is not obvious that the threshold below which no one should fall must be the same as the threshold above which nothing matters. One might give strong priority to getting people to a minimum threshold, and one might give no priority to getting people above some threshold, but these don't have to be the same threshold. One's concern with additional welfare gains might not reach zero until a much higher point.[11]

As a response to the health-and-safety issue discussed in this article, multiple-threshold sufficientarianism has two problems. First, wherever sufficientarians draw the upper threshold, they must be prepared for it to become a social maximum. If the threshold is high enough, this outcome might not be a problem for people with egalitarian leanings, but it reverses the issue from the way sufficientarians have expressed it. Sufficientarians' examples imply that we should expect to see well-off people experiencing a great deal of intra-group inequality that does not matter in terms of social justice.[12] But instead, sufficientarian arguments actually imply that all of the best-off people will be exactly equal at the highest threshold.

[11] Both Casal, 'Why Sufficiency', and Benbaji, 'A Defense', have considered the possibility of multiple thresholds.

[12] For example, Crisp, 'Equality', p. 755.

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Second, for the large number of people below that upper threshold, the negative thesis does not apply. Anyone who endorses multiple-threshold sufficientarianism must choose to provide a trivial benefit to a sufficiently large number of people who are already well-off (in terms of the minimum threshold) instead of choosing to provide a large benefit that will bring a small number of people up to that minimum threshold.

Sufficientarian examples have been misleading because they have been presented in isolation. Adherents have not sufficiently examined the ramifications of repeated application of the choices they ask us to make. The no-chocolates-for-pain-relief judgment sounds appealing if we imagine a one-time choice where we can spend a given amount of money on one or the other. But from this example sufficientarians ask us to draw conclusions about financial resource allocation and physical resource allocation, neither of which exists as an isolated one-time choice. A significant amount of money is merely the sum of many trivial amounts of money. If we ignore trivial losses every time we cause them, they will add up to significant losses. If the sufficiency threshold divides what is significant from what is trivial, we will necessarily have to sacrifice all consumption above that threshold as long as preventable causes push any innocent people below it. The sufficiency threshold does not seem adequately to divide what is significant from what is trivial when one sees it as an upper limit that is binding on most of the population.

This problem exists for all versions of sufficientarianism that incorporate Crisp's intuition that any weight for those who are already well-off is too much weight[13] or Benbaji's intuition that size matters more than numbers.[14] If we don't want the sufficiency threshold to become the social maximum, we have to put some minimal weight even on small benefits to people above the sufficiency threshold. I do not believe that many sufficientarians are actually trying to smuggle in a social maximum equal to the sufficiency minimum. Therefore, I believe the negative thesis has to be dropped or significantly curtailed, even though doing so requires accepting the apparently counter-intuitive result that sometimes we have to prefer chocolates for the well-off to pain relief for the badly-off.

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[13] Crisp, 'Equality', p. 753.
[14] Benbaji, 'Sufficiency', pp. 327–8.

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