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Some Questions (and Answers) for Sufficientarians***[[1]](#footnote-1)•***

Liam Shields

**Abstract:** Critics of sufficientarianism have argued that the two most commonly advocated versions of sufficientarianism, Upper-Limit and Headcount Sufficientarianism, are vulnerable to compelling objections. In this paper, Shields shows that rather than being the final word on sufficientarianism, these objections raise tricky questions that remain unanswered, including “why should we be indifferent once people have enough?” and “should we ever maximize sufficiency at the expense of the least advantaged?” In an attempt to point the way forward for sufficientarianism, Shields suggests some plausible answers available to sufficientarians and examines the prospects for some adopting pluralist versions of sufficientarianism.

**Keywords:** Sufficientarianism, Distributive Justice, Egalitarianism

**Bio:** Dr Shields is a Lecturer in Political Theory at the University of Manchester. He has held post-doctoral research positions at the Center for Ethics in Society, Stanford University and the Institute for Advanced Study, University of Warwick. He has published in journals such as *Utilitas* and *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* and has a monograph forthcoming with Edinburgh University Press entitled “Just Enough: Sufficiency as a Demand of Justice.” His main areas of research interest are distributive justice, especially sufficientarianism, equality of opportunity, justice in education and justice in child-rearing.

**Introduction**

Different laws and public policies alter the size and proportion of individual shares of wealth and well-being, as well as access to health care and education. For example, a decision to build a factory in one part of the country opens up job opportunities and economic prosperity for some at the expense of others. A decision to lower tax rates at the top rather than the bottom of the income distribution directly affects how much income individuals will have to promote their welfare. These decisions effect the distribution of benefits and burdens in ways that are capable of being evaluated as just or unjust.

Distributive justice is concerned with general principles capable of identifying what distributions fall into these categories. In conjunction with a good deal of empirical work, the principles can then be used as a guide by those making decisions about laws and public policies. Debates about distributive justice have primarily focused on clarifying both the currency of justice (e.g. welfare, resources, capabilities), that is, what we should care about the distribution of, and the pattern or way that currency should be distributed or shared out (e.g. equal, sufficient or as large as possible).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Now, consider the following approach to problems of distributive justice. If someone were to say to you that it is important that you secure enough of some goods, such as health, wealth and well-being, you would probably think that it is so obviously true as to not really be worth saying. If someone were to say to you that the *only* thing that matters is that you secure enough of those goods, you would probably think that this is so obviously false as to not really be worth saying. At the very least you would think a lot more needs to be said about what it means to say that people have *enough* of those goods.

Sufficientarians about distributive justice make claims about the importance of securing enough that are not dissimilar to those made above. Some claims they make have seemed true, perhaps trivially so. Other claims seem false or, at least, raise very tricky questions that have not been answered satisfactorily. If sufficientarians are right that the idea of sufficiency should play a very important role in our thinking about the distribution of benefits and burdens, such as wealth and well-being, then they must avoid saying something that is either trivially true or obviously false. Over the years, sufficientarianism has been thought by many critics to invite difficult questions.[[3]](#footnote-3) For sufficientarianism to prove acceptable, proponents of the view must show that these questions can be answered in at least plausible ways.

The paper defends some answers to these questions and proceeds as follows. First, I set out a capacious definition of sufficientarianism that allows a wide variety of distinctive views to count as distinctively sufficientarian. Second, I raise some questions that can be derived from some common objections. I then suggest some ways of answering these questions. Third, I specify several less familiar sufficientarian views and show how these views may respond to questions that they give rise to. Overall, I have two aims. The first is to show that sufficientarians have at least adequate responses to many of the questions that have been asked of them. The second is to describe some relatively under-explored pluralist sufficientarian views and identify their strengths. Achieving each of these aims would provide general support for sufficientarianism as well as indicate some promising ways forward.

1. **What is Sufficientarianism?**

Sufficientarians endorse the moral relevance of securing enough. They hold that whether a person has or may have *enough* has a significant effect on how we ought to regard them as possible beneficiaries or burden-bearers in the allocation of whatever goods are deemed to matter. For instance, most sufficientarians hold that it is more important to benefit someone who lacks enough than it is to benefit someone who has enough, at least when we can benefit those who lack enough by at least as much as those who have enough.

More precisely, sufficientarians make two claims. The first claim is the *Positive Thesis*, which states that it is important that some individuals secure enough of some goods. Note that this does not commit sufficientarians to the claim that it is always better to be above rather than below the threshold. Nor does it commit them to claiming that we always have more reason to move a person above rather than below the threshold. Though there are many additional claims they may make, sufficientarians need only insist, as a matter of definition, that it is valuable or important to secure enough. The second claim is the *Shift Thesis*, which states that once an individual has secured enough, our reasons to benefit them further change or shift.[[4]](#footnote-4) There is a shift in our moral reasons to benefit or burden some person once they have enough. As such, the nature of the claim that they can press on distributive decisions is different depending on whether they are above or below the sufficiency threshold. The shift is what makes a view sufficientarian. The different kinds of shifts that are possible specify different versions of sufficientarianism. I will survey some possible shifts briefly now for purely illustrative purposes.

A shift could specify that our reasons to benefit a person diminish more quickly or slowly once a person has enough, or that there is some sudden drop in the importance of benefitting a person once they have enough. A shift could specify that, once a person has enough, we ought to ensure they have an equal share or that benefits should be distributed in accordance with merit or desert. A shift could specify that, once a person has secured enough, we have much stronger reasons to distribute in a way that is responsibility-sensitive. A shift could specify that, once a person has enough, we should be solely or primarily concerned with equality, while prior to the achievement of universal sufficiency we should not be concerned with equality. The type of shift is only one area of variation and difference amongst sufficiency views, but we can see that there are a wide variety of possible shifts, some of which will raise different sorts of theoretical questions than others and will issue different guidance.

Having set out the basic idea of sufficientarianism I will set out the most common versions of that view and consider the questions that have been raised and answers that may be given to them. I then move on to discuss pluralist sufficientarian views and explore the questions that can be raised to these views and set out some possible answers, before concluding with some remarks about the future for sufficientarianism.

**2. Upper-Limit Sufficientarianism**

One of the most widely discussed versions of sufficientarianism, views securing enough as a kind of upper-limit, above which claims for further benefits lack normative force. There have been many different advocates of this view, most notably Roger Crisp and Harry Frankfurt.[[5]](#footnote-5) The common idea is that so long as people have enough, it is not important to give them more or to prioritize the worse off or to equalize individual shares of benefits.

Roger Crisp motivates this position by asking us to consider a hypothetical example called the Beverly Hills Case, in which everyone is either a millionaire or a billionaire. In such cases, it seems we do not have particularly strong moral reason to be concerned with the inequality, vast though it is. However, in response, Paula Casal notes that, if everyone has enough but we can distribute some further benefits, it seems that it is apt to have some concern for equality. Casal’s case is as follows:

“Suppose that having provided every patient with enough medicine, food, comfort, and so forth, a hospital receives a fantastic donation, which includes spare rooms for visitors, delicious meals, and the best in world cinema. If its administrators then arbitrarily decide to devote all those luxuries to just a few fortunate beneficiaries, their decision would be unfair.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

While this is a forceful counter-example to upper-limit sufficientarianism, it does not settle the matter decisively against the view. Rather, it raises a question that proponents may find hard to answer. That question is:

*Q1: Why should we be indifferent once people have enough?*

In light of this, sufficientarians need to explain why it is that indifference is the appropriate response to securing enough. I believe that there are at least two decent answers that can be given.

*Non-Comparative Ambitions*

The first answer that I will consider takes inspiration from work by Harry Frankfurt, the originator of modern sufficientarianism. On this view, all reasonable distributive claims are satiable and non-comparative and therefore, there is an upper limit to the claims one can make. An ambition is satiable when, after a certain amount of the currency is possessed, no more of that currency can satisfy the ambition further. Consider, for instance, my ambition to have ten dollars. An eleventh dollar does not satisfy that ambition further. An ambition is comparative when it does not rely for its satisfaction on the fact that others have less, more, or the same amount of this currency than I. In this sense, ambitions do not compete with one another for satisfaction. For instance, if I want one more dollar than you, this is comparative. But if I only want ten dollars, then it is irrelevant from the point of view of my ambition what number of dollars you have. If our ambitions were comparative, then satisfying these ambitions may require you to have less than enough. As such, it may not be possible to achieve sufficiency for all, and for this reason it seems unreasonable to insist on comparative ambitions being satisfied for justice to be done.

Frankfurt’s original formulation of the sufficiency threshold is as follows:

“To say that a person has enough money is to say that he is content, or it is reasonable for him to be content, with having no more money than he has. And to say this is, in turn, to say something like the following: the person does not (or cannot reasonably) regard whatever (if anything) is unsatisfying or distressing about his life as due to his having too little money.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

We need not focus on money as the relevant currency. The thing we should have enough of. Indeed, later in the paper Frankfurt focuses on the level of contentment in one’s life. Why, then, might a person reasonably be content with the level of welfare or money that they have? One thought is that it would be unreasonable to demand more. This could be explained by individuals’ authentic ambitions or preferences, which may be thought relevant to determining one’s share of the appropriate currency.[[8]](#footnote-8) If only some of those ambitions were valid claims that we can press against others, then it would be possible that such ambitions or preferences could be satiable as well. If these ambitions and preferences are non-comparative and satiable once a person has enough, we have no reasons to care about equality or further benefits. This may bring to mind the idea that persons may need enough to pay their rent or feed themselves, but this is an instrumental reason to think securing enough is important and so cannot help defend a fundamental sufficiency principle. However, unlike rent and nutrition, our authentic ambitions or preferences are more plausibly non-instrumental and constitutive of our reasonable contentment and well-being.

This last point can be explained as follows. If I could pay my rent without money, perhaps by providing some service instead, I would not need enough money to pay my rent. However, our authentic ambitions and preferences cannot likewise be detached from our welfare. Moreover, sufficiency need not focus on actual welfare levels but our opportunity for welfare through resources. On this view it is possible to be concerned with having enough resources to realize our ambitions, so long as they are satiable and non-comparative, and fail to achieve them for other reasons, such as weakness of will. Note that Frankfurt is concerned with the way that a deficiency of whatever currency we focus on is the reason for your failure to achieve your aims. Other deficiencies, perhaps those that are in terms of your talents or work-ethic, are those that can diminish your welfare in ways that do not concern a theory of distributive justice. As such, this view can be described in either welfarist or non-welfarist terms. That is, in terms that appeal to how well the individual’s life goes for her, or in other terms that are independent of how well her life goes, for instance, how much wealth she has. Because each of these options is available proponents of the view need not take a stance in long-standing debates between perfectionists and anti-perfectionists, who disagree about whether justice may be concerned directly with promoting welfare.

I now want to say something about the attraction of this view and why we might think non-comparative and satiable ambitions are the only reasonable or relevant demands. An idea that makes sense of preferring non-comparative and satiable ambitions is that insatiable and comparative ambitions cannot be realized by all persons simultaneously. If we think that the entitlements of justice should be compossible, that is mutually realizable, and if we think that individuals’ authentic ambitions exhaust such claims, then we will be wary of insatiable or comparative ambitions since they will not be compossible. If our ambitions are formulated in ways that make their achievement turn necessarily on the failure of others or on being better than others, then they express a kind of selfishness and disregard for the welfare of others. Think for instance of those who care primarily about earning more than their colleagues, or those who rely for their own happiness on the unhappiness of others. These sorts of attitudes seem to have no place in a just society. Moreover, the inverse of these attitudes express a kind of mutual regard, respect and equality. For instance, consider those who would like a pay-rise only if others are likewise rewarded, or those who can be happy only when others are happy too. These strike us as more noble sentiments and it is a kind of sufficientarianism that delivers them.

To sum up, this focus on Non-Comparative Ambitions enables the upper-limit sufficientarian to claim that the only claims relevant to justice are satiable and non-comparative, and so further benefits are not relevant to justice and should be met with indifference.

Some may remain unpersuaded by this response, for instance, those who believe that preferences need not be satiable to be valid, or those who believe that preferences and ambitions are entirely irrelevant to distributive justice, so it is worthwhile considering an alternative answer to the question.

*The Circumstances of Justice*

The circumstances of justice are the material situation in which principles of distributive justice apply. Outside of those circumstances other moral norms may apply, but not justice. The circumstances of justice are those in which there are not so few resources that no one’s claims can be met (extreme scarcity), but not so many that there are no competing claims (super-abundance).[[9]](#footnote-9)

It is easy to see how the Satiable, Non-Comparative Ambitions view I just explained may be problematic if we accept that principles of justice only apply in the circumstances of justice. If each of our plans requires certain resources to be pursued, and if resources are moderately scarce such that we cannot each have enough, then it looks like it is impossible for our plans, insofar as they give rise to claims of justice for us, to be reconciled with justice. Imagine that what is to be distributed is a small amount of wood and I have the authentic ambition to play a wooden flute while you have the authentic ambition to go on long walks that require a walking stick. However, the piece of wood cannot be turned into both a flute and a walking stick. So, the circumstances of justice make it the case that, even though we both independently chose satiable and non-comparative plans, our ambitions cannot be simultaneously satisfied. However, one could still insist that there is an important difference between plans that we formulate that are non-comparative and satiable and plans that are made comparative by the circumstances of justice. All plans are, on this view, made comparative by the circumstances of justice, so, one could argue that, formulating such plans is not especially distasteful and does not entail viewing a person as a competitor or less than equal. When a person formulates a plan that is by *necessity* comparative, because it is in principle comparative, one is viewing that other person as a means or as inferior or as someone to be dominated.

I now want to consider a separate view. If we take the circumstances of justice seriously, it looks as if there are two morally important sufficiency thresholds. One threshold, where resources are too scarce to trigger principles of justice, and another where resources are so abundant that justice no longer applies. At these points we can say that, whether there are enough resources not merely affects which demands of justice apply, but determines whether the demands of justice apply at all. One might think that these thresholds do not determine justice. They tell us when evaluations of justice can properly take place. But we should note that we can have a duty of justice to bring about enough resources for distributive justice to apply. So, this would play a similar role to the role played by natural duties of justice to set up and maintain the conditions necessary for a just order, in other words our duties to establish just relations with others.[[10]](#footnote-10) Understood in this way, both thresholds can establish why it is that justice is a self-starting value. If we live in scarcity we have reasons, reasons to do with the realization of the value of justice, to overcome that scarcity.

Note, however, that according to our definition, these thresholds must be determined in ways that are non-comparative, and that the definition of the circumstances of justice is often in comparative terms. So, for example, scarcity is not necessarily avoided when there are 1,000,000 units of resources. This depends on how many people, and needs, there are since scarcity is defined by the absence of enough for everyone and so the more people there are the more needs there are and the more resources to satisfy those needs. The amount of resources that is necessary to satisfy some claims would not be some fixed level, it would be comparative. The idea of the circumstances of justice being determined by absolute scarcity or abundance would provide a decent explanation of why there may be no distributive reasons or duties over some absolute threshold, as some influential sufficientarians claim.

Having considered some answers that Upper-Limit Sufficientarians can offer to the difficult question they have been asked, I now move onto consider the second major version of sufficientarianism and the ways it may answer the questions that have been asked of it.

**3. Headcount Sufficientarianism**

Headcount Sufficientarianism holds that we should maximize the number of people who have enough.[[11]](#footnote-11) Critics have pointed out that this view has some very counter-intuitive implications.[[12]](#footnote-12) Following Headcount Sufficientarianism will sometimes require benefitting the better off, who are only just below the sufficiency threshold, at the expense of the worse off, who are much further below the threshold. In cases involving some people who are so badly off that they cannot be brought up to the threshold and other people who are only marginally below the threshold, this principle would always recommend benefiting the better off. This type of decision may lead us to reject or question Headcount Sufficientarianism, for it seems to fail to recognize the seriousness of the plight of those most vulnerable, those who cannot ever get enough.

It seems to contradict two common thoughts underpinning major theories of distributive justice. The first is the idea that, the worse off a person is, the more important it is to benefit her and improve her position. This thought does some work in explaining why it is better to help the poor rather than the well-off, and amongst the poor, the poorest have a stronger claim to assistance. For instance, we might think it is much more important to help the global poor than to contribute to a friend’s drama school tuition. The second thought is that the larger a benefit to a person, the greater the reason to distribute that benefit. This intuition does some work in explaining why, if we can give a vaccine, eliminating risk, to someone who faces a very high risk of contracting a disease and someone else who faces a very low risk, then we should give the vaccine to the person who faces the high risk. In many cases Headcount Sufficientarianism will favor benefitting the better off by a small amount, which is sufficient to push them above the threshold, rather than benefitting the worse off by a large amount, which is insufficient to push them above the threshold.

However, the fact that such a view is open to these counter-examples and contradicts some ideas that underpin a lot of contemporary normative thought does not settle the matter. Rather, it raises the question of when, if ever, it is appropriate to maximize the number of people who achieve some level of welfare at the expense of various other values. This depends on the importance of benefits that push a person above the threshold rather than benefits that do not push a person above that threshold.

The question that remains is

*Q2: Why should we maximize sufficiency at the expense of the least advantaged?*

We can see that the most plausible cases where maximizing seems appropriate are triage cases. For instance, consider the case of a military doctor who must deal with casualties as they arrive. She will be unable to save some, while others will be difficult to save and others still may be fairly easy to save. Rather than investing her time, effort and resources in those who cannot be saved, or even those who are very costly to save, it makes sense for her to hold back resources and save the least costly ones as she can save many more people that way. This seems like a far more sensible decision procedure than giving her patients equal attention and resources or prioritizing the least advantaged, since doing so may minimize the number of lives saved, perhaps saving no one.

We can ask what are the key features of triage cases that make maximizing the incidence of sufficiency at the expense of benefitting the least advantaged the best thing to do? To answer this question we should focus on a simple case and we should look at the kinds of claims that the better off can make and the kinds of claims the worse off can make. So, let us imagine a case where one person is very badly off and cannot be brought up to some critical threshold, call her *Lost Cause*, and another person is still badly off, but can be brought up to that threshold, call her *Savable*. *Lost* *Cause* is worse off than *Savable*. As such, she has a stronger claim than *Savable*, in one respect. Being worse off than another beneficiary generally gives us a reason to benefit that person, but this reason is not decisive. It would not be permissible for someone to not pay a debt or meet the terms of a legitimate contract simply because they were worse off than the person they owed.[[13]](#footnote-13) It may also be permissible to benefit the better off at the expense of the worse off if by doing so we help a much larger number of people. However, in our case, there are no promises or debts and there are only two people.

One other feature of the claims of the better off that can trump those of the worse off are to do with the size of the benefit. This is not a wholly uncontroversial claim, but one can support the importance of the size of the benefits, within some range of well-being scores, in the following way. Consider the plight of Amy and Hayley, who are equally well-off. It then becomes possible to offer only one of them a college place. Amy will benefit much more than Hayley from the college place, for various reasons to do with her particular interest in college, her intelligence and her attitude to work. Hayley would benefit from the college place, but not as much as Amy. If we stipulate that there are no other reasons to give Hayley rather than Amy the place at college, then we should, I think, give Amy the college place. The general reason for this is that Amy would benefit more from it. Now, let’s change the case, so that Hayley is actually slightly worse off than Amy and the college place would improve her welfare such that she would be at least as well off as Amy. I think in this second case, so long as the size of the benefit to Amy is large, it can still trump the fact that Hayley is worse off, at least assuming that Hayley is neither very much worse off than Amy nor very badly off in absolute terms.

Returning to *Lost Cause* and *Savable*, we can see that sometimes the size or significance of a benefit can trump the reason that a person is worse off. However, in this case, *Lost Cause* is very badly off in absolute terms but so is *Savable*. *Savable* and *Lost Cause* are therefore symmetrically situated with respect to their being very badly off, though one is worse off than the other. This means that *Lost Cause* can use the reason that she is worse off to support benefitting her, but she cannot use the reason that she is very badly off to support benefitting her, since that reason is on both sides of the equation.

What about *Savable*? What can she use to support her claim to be benefitted? She can say that the size or significance of the benefit, which sees her escape a very bad condition, is sufficient to override the reason of being worse off. It is on the side of the *ex post* calculation not the *ex ante* calculation.

To see this more clearly, note that the considerations are often associated with efficiency, but they need not only be reducible to efficiency. They could be considerations of justice. In the case of *Savable*, the benefits she gets do make a big difference to her, but the benefits to *Lost Cause*, do not make a difference with respect to her being very badly off, though they improve her condition slightly. To use the benefit to improve the position of *Lost Cause* is to use it in a way that is less effective. However, the interesting and important question for the Sufficientarian is whether there is some threshold that explains this, rather than some general rule about the size of benefits defeating how badly off a person is. If it were simply about benefits of size A being sufficient to override concerns of being worse off by B units, then this rule would apply throughout the distribution, and not merely to benefits that secured an above threshold quality of life. Therefore, if the threshold makes a difference, it must be because being at a certain absolute level (or range) of advantage gives one’s claims additional force and not because one stands to benefit greatly. We can now ask, are there thresholds like this?

In triage cases, it looks like securing a certain level of benefit is a necessary pre-condition for living a decent life or pursuing other goals, whereas living below it does not. If there is a pre-condition threshold level of capability then this would do the job. It makes sense to maximize the pre-condition level because, below the threshold one’s life is capped at a certain level of welfare and that welfare level is particularly low. Perhaps this is the difference between a life worth living and a life not worth living, which might be denoted by negative and positive values of welfare.

So, we have not provided an argument which can solidly support such thresholds, nor an argument for one in particular threshold, but we have seen what the nature of such a threshold must be like and what it must not be like. The consequence of there being a morally relevant threshold cannot be that a benefit of a particular size trumps how badly off the benefit recipient is. Though this is an interesting problem, it is not the essential problem for Headcount Sufficientarians. The issue for the Headcount Sufficientarian is to show that only being above the threshold, which opens up many possibilities of gains, is extremely valuable and more so than gains that do not help an individual get above the threshold. I have said that understanding this threshold as a pre-condition for not only large benefits, but for autonomy or capability may do the job. As such, Headcount Sufficientarianism may, as triage suggests, be a very useful principle in the management of healthcare. Lives not worth living or of negative value may be particularly supportive of Headcount Sufficientarian principles since the quality of such lives is so different from lives of positive value or that are worth living. It not simply that one is better than another, but that they are very different sorts of life.

However, while it is possible to respond to this question by appealing to triage cases, they do not sit easily with sufficientarianism’s commitment to non-instrumental principles. The idea that we should maximize the number of people who have enough to survive can be explained perfectly well by any adequate prioritarian theory that is welfarist since it is reasonable to think that having one’s life saved is the only way to promote one’s welfare. The unsavable, in particular, cannot have their welfare increased. The difficult-to-save may be worse off than the easier-to-save, but the fact that we can save *more* people can sometimes override the fact that the most badly off person we could save is not benefitted at all. Some prioritarian views, which claim that the worse off someone is, the important it is to benefit her, can explain this perfectly well. so it is not clear why we would need a sufficientarian view to explain it. A focus on welfare, and life-saving as a contributing factor to welfare, suggests that any sufficiency threshold here is instrumental. This is not to say thinking about it in sufficientarianism terms is not a good idea, as it may draw out attention to valuable thresholds, such thresholds cannot be non-instrumental and so do not speak in favor of the necessity of sufficientarianism.

If we are averse to appealing to welfare directly, as many political philosophers are, Headcount Sufficientarianism becomes more plausible. It might be that having our basic needs met, or avoiding severe pain, are such important achievements that they should be promoted at the expense of any benefits that fail to achieve them.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus, we might take this sort of route and defend a Headcount Sufficientarian view because being above the threshold of pain or need is better than having even slight pain or a slight need. No doubt some will remain unpersuaded by either of these avenues that are open, so it is worthwhile considering the merits of other Sufficientarian views.

**4. Some New Views and New Questions**

There are many possible Sufficientarian alternatives to Upper Limit or Head Count Sufficientarianism. I will explore some of them here. All of them deny maximizing the number who have enough as the appropriate guidance below the threshold, and all of them deny that the importance of benefits stops at the threshold(s). As such they avoid the two questions that can be asked of the dominant views, though they face other important questions.

I will focus on a few pluralist sufficientarian views, which are pluralist in that they appeal to sufficiency as well as other distributive principles.[[15]](#footnote-15)In addition, they may also appeal to different currencies. While sufficiency principles, when taken alone, may be implausible, some may be required in the best pluralist account of distributive justice. Securing enough could be one of the many things that matters when evaluating distribution. Utilizing the shift, we can imagine a concern with sufficiency being combined with a concern with equality, responsibility and rights and it is worth considering what the advantage of having a sufficiency principle among them is. The distinct advantage of a sufficiency principle is that it can help explain why we should give special priority or additional weight to persons in virtue of their being very badly off in terms of the relevant currency. Again, if we think there are reasons to be especially morally concerned with those who lack certain opportunities or capacities, that don’t apply to those who have them, and that having them does not mark the end of our obligations of justice, then we will have strong reason to think that having less than enough adds weight to claims.

There are two types of pluralist sufficientarian view. One sees the rival values or principles as always conflicting but with different weight attached. So, equality and sufficiency could both be important distributive principles but if we can satisfy one further than the other, we may have more reason to do so. Call this “conflicting pluralism”. The other pluralist sufficientarian view sees sufficiency as a pre-condition for some other principle or values. So, on this view sufficiency may need to be secured before equality becomes a relevant demand. I call this “ordered pluralism”. I focus below on elaborating two pluralist views, and the two variants of them, to illustrate the generally attractive but as yet unchartered territory for sufficientarians.

*Sufficiency and Responsibility*

Consider a version of Responsibility-Sensitive Sufficientarianism. Such a view would combine our concern for the badly off and our concern with individual responsibility. This could take either conflicting or ordered forms.[[16]](#footnote-16)

*Sufficiency as a Constraint on Responsibility*: No individual should bear costs that would push them below a threshold, even if they would otherwise be liable to bear those costs.

A draw-back of this view would be that even very well-off persons could make enormous gambles that, if they don’t pay off, those persons would not bear their full consequences. As such, other persons would have to bear the costs of compensating the reckless. Another form of this view, which may be more palatable, would be to see that those who are, *ex ante*, below a threshold cannot be held responsible. The reason for this might be that being in a very bad position currently can render your decisions to agree to do things, such as to take on dangerous work, non-voluntary. A more moderate view may say that whether a person has enough *ex post* or *ex ante*, should affect our reasons to hold them responsible for the costs of their actions.

Alternatively, we could say that sufficiency rather than equality is the relevant benchmark. On this view, no one should have less than enough, except through their own choice or fault.

*Luck Sufficientarianism:* No one should have less than enough through no fault or choice of their own.[[17]](#footnote-17)

This contrasts with the well-known luck egalitarian view that states that no one should have less than anyone else through no fault or choice of their own. This has the advantage of being less demanding, and could be more easily combined with other principles of justice that provide more efficient distributions.

*Sufficiency and Self-Ownership*

I now want to consider a final view, which responds to a possible problem that some may have with the Upper-Limit Sufficientarian View. In cases involving benefits that arrive from no one’s production, like manna from heaven, it is usually better to give them to someone who will benefit from them than to waste them.[[18]](#footnote-18) Wasting benefits requires a pretty strong justification. So, if all people have enough resources, at least, to successfully achieve their satiable non-comparative ambitions, and we still have resources to distribute, why not give someone some more resources? These resources might make their lives more comfortable or allow them to acquire other resources that would make their chances of success even higher. Upper-Limit Sufficientarian has nothing to say against wasting the resources, except for appealing to some additional aggregative principle. We need at least some positive reason, and not merely the absence of certain claims to motivate the view that it is permissible to waste the resources.

One such reason may be the costs of providing those benefits. Returning to the hospital case, we might note that hospital staff will be put out by having to get the additional benefits, by cooking the better meals and by maintaining, installing, and dealing with additional issues caused by having the TV, such as monitoring its content and its volume. These costs might provide us with some reason to think that above some threshold the importance of benefitting people may be so trivial that it is not worth imposing the costs on anyone to ensure that they are provided. As currently stated, this view is not satisfactory. First, the costs to others are subject to appraisal by distributive justice, so the costs to others, in the diminution of their share of welfare or resources, can be accounted for. Second, the costs to others vary. So, insofar as the threshold is going to be non-instrumental, it will move around and so sufficiency itself becomes a moving target. It suggests that we should be focusing on maximizing a fundamental currency rather than giving importance to two.

A variation of this view, however, is plausible. If we take the view that individuals have self-ownership rights, and if we believe that, apart from manna from heaven, benefits to people can be provided only by taking them from others or otherwise coercing people to produce them, we might think that this would provide a cap on the benefits that can be redistributed.[[19]](#footnote-19) Such a view may look like it precludes distribution at all, but the view can be softened so that only those benefits that are somehow crucial to living a minimally decent life or other concerns that may be more important than self-ownership rights can over-ride them. Nevertheless, we might think of a sufficiency-constrained self-ownership theory as explaining both why we have no need to benefit people above some point and that we should nevertheless insist on benefitting people up to a point. Since the value of not violating rights or not infringing them can be seen as equally serious, no matter how well off the victim is, and the value of benefits can be seen as diminishing, we have a case of a non-instrumental threshold.[[20]](#footnote-20) This would specify an Upper-Limit Sufficientarian view that could respond to some of the key objections to it. This is not to say that it does not give rise to further worries, but it suggests that there are ways to respond that are at least minimally plausible and so it is a route sufficientarians may wish to take.

In addition, we can make a further claim in defense of this kind of view: it is not committed to maximizing or prioritizing below the threshold. It is, as stated, silent on the issue of how to distribute benefits and burdens below the threshold. So, for example, one could hold that we should distribute equally below the threshold where sufficiency for all is not possible by adding some less important concern for equality.

**Conclusion**

While many have objected to commonly discussed sufficientarian views there are some adequate responses that can be given. Sufficientarians have a number of lines of argument available to them with the existing views, and also a number of pluralist views that are Sufficientarian. The latter views can be extremely diverse and have a number of attractive features. I have said something about the promise of views that combine a concern with sufficiency with a concern with self-ownership or responsibility, and the tasks that remain for proponents of them.

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2. For some discussions of the Equality of What debate see, G. A. Cohen, “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice,” *Ethics* 99, (1989), 906-944; Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 285-306. A. K. Sen, ‘Equality of What?’ in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* vol. 1 ed. S. McMurrin (Salt Lake: University of Utah Press, 1980), 195-220. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Richard Arneson, "Distributive Justice and Basic Capability Equality," in *Capabilities Equality: Basic issues and problems* ed. Alexander Kaufman (Routledge, 2005); Paula Casal. "Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough," *Ethics* 117, no. 2 (2007): 296-326; Robert Goodin, "Egalitarianism, Fetishistic and Otherwise," *Ethics* 98, no. 1 (1987): 44-49; Shlomi Segall, "What is the Point of Sufficiency?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (2014), doi: 10.1111/japp.12062; Karl Widerquist, "How the Sufficiency Minimum Becomes a Social Maximum," *Utilitas* 22, no. 4 (2010): 474-480. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This characterization was originally set out and defended in Liam Shields, "The Prospects for Sufficientarianism," *Utilitas* 24, no. 1 (2012): 101-117. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Roger Crisp, "Equality, Priority, and Compassion," *Ethics* 113, 4 (2003): 745-763; Roger Crisp, "Egalitarianism and Compassion," *Ethics* 114, no. 1 (2003): 119-126; Harry Frankfurt, "Equality as a Moral Ideal," *Ethics* 98, no. 1 (1987): 21-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Casal, Why Sufficiency is Not Enough, 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Frankfurt, Equality as a Moral Ideal, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Harry Frankfurt, "Necessity and Desire," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 45, no. 1 (1984): 1-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human* Nature, book III, part II, section II; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 109-112. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* 98-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Casal, Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough, 298, 315-316; Dale Dorsey, “Toward a Theory of the Basic Minimum,” *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 7, no. 4 (2008): 432-445; Ed Page, *Climate Change, Justice and Future Generations*, (Edward Elgar, 2006), 85-95; Ed Page, ‘Justice Between Generations: Investigating a Sufficientarian Approach’, *Journal of Global Ethics* 3, no. 1 (2007): 3-20, 11; J. Roemer, “Eclectic Distributional Ethics,” *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 3, no. 3 (2004): 267-281. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Richard Arneson, “Distributive Justice and Basic Capability Equality: “Good Enough” is Not Good Enough,”: 36-38; Casal, Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough, 298, 315-316; Roemer, Eclectic Distributional Ethics. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. One could argue that no such contract could be valid, but this seems too eccentric a view to take seriously as a general constraint on contract. This is consistent with some inequalities being sufficient to render a contract invalid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. D. V. Axelsen and L. Nielsen, (2014), “Sufficiency as Freedom from Duress.” *Journal of Political Philosophy*. Online first: doi: 10.1111/jopp.12048 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Some hybrid views are discussed in Casal “Why Sufficiency is not Enough”. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For one example see Andrew Williams, ‘Liberty, Equality, and Property’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory,* ed.s J. Dryzek, B. Honig and A. Phillips, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 488-506. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This label is given to a view discussed in Lippert-Rasmussen, Kasper, "Justice and Bad Luck", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*(Summer 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/justice-bad-luck/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Casal, Why Sufficiency is not Enough, 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. One could understand this as amending Left-Libertarianism with a right to sufficiency rather than equality of the value of natural resources. This would be a rival interpretation of the Lockean proviso to leave “enough and as good.” See Hillel Steiner, *An Essay on Rights*, (1996) Blackwell. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Dale Dorsey, "Equality-tempered prioritarianism," *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 13, no. 1 (2014): 45-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)