

# To sufficiency and beyond!

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## I

In his seminal paper, “Equality as a Moral Ideal”, Harry Frankfurt attacks egalitarian principles of distributive justice for contributing to the moral shallowness of our time and sets out a rival position, the doctrine of sufficiency, which states that “if everyone had enough it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others.”<sup>1</sup> In the decades that have followed, philosophers have built upon Frankfurt’s work. The positive and critical literature on sufficientarianism is now wide-ranging and the position is discussed in debates in moral and political philosophy, as well as jurisprudence, bioethics, public health, transport and urban planning, and library and information science.<sup>2</sup>

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\* I am grateful to audiences at the MANCEPT Research Seminar, the “Can Sufficiency Get Enough” conference, University Bayreuth, the “Justice, Freedom, and the Good Life”, workshop at Aarhus University, the “Never Enough?” conference, University of Pompeu Fabra, “Just Enough Health? Sufficientarianism and the Future of Health Care Provision” conference, University of Liverpool for helpful comments and suggestions, and to Pedro Silva and Viki Pederson for their critical commentaries. I am also especially grateful to David Axelsen, Tim Kenyon, Lasse Nielsen, Christian Schemmel and Hillel Steiner for comments on an earlier draft, as well as the comments of two anonymous reviewers.

<sup>1</sup> Frankfurt, Harry. "Equality as a moral ideal." *Ethics* 98.1 (1987): 21-43.: 21

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Wouters, Sofie, et al. "Acceptable health and priority weighting: Discussing a reference-level approach using sufficientarian reasoning." *Social Science & Medicine* 181 (2017): 158-167. Pereira, Rafael HM, Tim Schwanen, and David Banister. "Distributive justice and equity in transportation." *Transport Reviews* 37.2 (2017): 170-191. DeCamp, Matthew. "A Sufficient Limit to “Reasonable” Choices." *The American Journal of Bioethics* 12.8 (2012): 36-38. Kohn, Margaret. "What is wrong with gentrification?." *Urban Research & Practice* 6.3 (2013): 297-310. Wright, R. George. "Equal Protection and the Idea of Equality." *Law & Ineq.* 34 (2016): 1. Chiao, Vincent. "Equality, assurance and criminalization." *Canadian Journal of Law & Jurisprudence* 27.1 (2014): 5-25. Wee, Bert, and Karst Geurs. "Discussing equity and social exclusion in accessibility evaluations." *European Journal of Transport and Infrastructure Research* 11.4 (2011). Mathiesen, Kay. "Informational Justice: A Conceptual Framework for Social Justice in Library and Information Services." *Library Trends* 64.2 (2015): 198-225.

Many different versions of sufficientarianism have been advocated in these debates. Some sufficientarians endorse capabilities, while others endorse welfare as the currency of justice. Sufficientarians also disagree about how high or low the threshold should be set and how benefits and burdens should be distributed when it is not possible to provide everyone with enough. However, almost all sufficientarians follow Frankfurt in endorsing the negative thesis, which states that: no distributive principles apply to the distribution of benefits and burdens once everyone has secured enough.<sup>3</sup>

The debate about sufficientarianism has focused on the intuitive plausibility of the negative thesis.<sup>4</sup> Critics point to strongly held intuitions about the importance of addressing inequalities even among those who appear to have secured enough.<sup>5</sup> In response, sufficientarians appeal to

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<sup>3</sup> The only exceptions appear to be: Brown, Campbell. "Priority or sufficiency... or both?." *Economics & Philosophy* 21.2 (2005): 199-220; Pedersen, Viki ML, and Soren Flinch Midtgaard. "Is Anti-Paternalism Enough?." *Political Studies* (2017); and Shields, Liam. *Just Enough: Sufficiency as a Demand of Justice*. Edinburgh University Press, 2016. On the understanding of sufficientarianism that I offer later, shift sufficientarianism, a lot more people count as sufficientarian and on that understanding it is not true to say that "almost all" sufficientarians endorse the negative thesis, but as they do not self-identify as sufficientarians.

<sup>4</sup> Other objections include: Segall, S. 2016. "What is the Point of Sufficiency?." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33.1: 36-55., Nielsen, Lasse. "Sufficiency Grounded as Sufficiently Free: A Reply to Shlomi Segall." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33.2 (2016): 202-216. Nielsen provides an adequate response to this objection, which only targets telic versions of sufficientarianism. For upwards transfers objection see Richard Arneson, 'Perfectionism and Politics', *Ethics* 111 (2000), pp. 37-63, at 56-7; Arneson, 'Good Enough is not Enough', pp. 26-33; Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, 'Educational Equality versus Educational Adequacy: a Critique of Anderson and Satz', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 26 (2009), pp. 117-128, at 125-6; Casal, 'Sufficiency is Not Enough', pp. 315-6; Roemer, John E. "Eclectic distributive ethics." *Politics, philosophy & economics* 3.3 (2004): 267-281: p. 279; Temkin, L. "Equality, priority or what?." *Economics & Philosophy* 19.1 (2003): 61-87:, p. 65. But Crisp and most sufficientarians avoid this objection. Objections to the vagueness or ambiguity of the threshold are, at most, requests for further information and since vagueness and ambiguity remain in rival accounts of distributive justice, it is not a forceful objection. Responses to that worry can be found in Axelsen, D. and Nielsen, L. "Essentially Enough" in Fourie and Rid ed. *What is Enough? Sufficiency, Justice, and Health*, Oxford University Press (2016) and Fourie "Sufficiency: a primer" in Fourie, C., "Sufficiency: a primer" in Fourie, Carina, and Annette Rid, eds. *What is Enough?: Sufficiency, Justice, and Health*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Those who advance the indifference objection against upper-limit sufficientarianism include: Arneson, R. 2005. "Distributive justice and Basic Capability Equality: 'Good Enough' is Not Good Enough". In A. Kaufman, ed. *Capabilities Equality: Basic Issues and Problems*. London: Routledge: 17-43, pp. 26-33; Casal "Why sufficiency is not enough." *Ethics* 117.2 (2007): 296-326. pp. 307-8, 311-2 and 315-6; Knight, Carl. "Abandoning the abandonment objection: Luck egalitarian arguments for public insurance." *Res Publica* 21.2 (2015): 119-135. ; Shields, 'the prospects for sufficientarianism'; Shields, Liam. *Just Enough: Sufficiency as a Demand of Justice*. Edinburgh University Press, 2016; Larry Temkin, 'Egalitarianism Defended', *Ethics* 113 (2003), pp. 745-63, at 769-71. For a practical version of this worry that target's sufficientarianism's neglect of the need to understand the causal role inequality plays in generating harms, see Deveaux, Monique. "Re-evaluating Sufficientarianism in Light of Evidence of Inequality's Harms." *Ethics and Social Welfare* (2017): 1-20. In "What is Wrong with Sufficiency?."

further intuitions about cases or have adopted multiple sufficiency thresholds, in an attempt to avoid or diminish the force of the objection.<sup>6</sup> Although the debate about sufficientarianism is now multifaceted and sophisticated, it remains a debate centered on intuitions about the negative thesis.

In this paper, I argue that the negative thesis, and therefore almost all versions of sufficientarianism should be rejected, but not because of counter-intuitive implications, rather because the best explanation for the negative thesis show it to be either redundant or incoherent.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section Two, I explain the current state of the debate between upper-limit sufficientarians and their critics, including the most recent contributions. I characterize this debate as remaining on the intuitive level. I argue that without further explanation of the negative thesis, any intuitive judgement must remain provisional at best. In Section Three, I clarify the negative thesis by considering how indifference to supra-threshold distributions might be explained. I take up one suggestion from the literature, according to which no distributive principles apply to supra-threshold distributions *because* such distributions are irrelevant to justice. I argue that this explanation renders upper-limit sufficientarianism redundant because the sufficiency threshold offers no distinctive guidance for justice relevant distributions. To avoid redundancy, then, sufficientarians must hold that supra-threshold distributions are relevant to justice. However, the claim that supra-threshold distributions are relevant to justice cannot be reconciled with the negative thesis itself. It is incoherent to say that distributions are relevant to justice, but that distributive justice is not concerned with them. I conclude this section that no

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Lasse Nielsen claims that the burden-drive version of the indifference objection retains force, while the benefit driven version does not. Widerquist, Karl. "How the sufficiency minimum becomes a social maximum." *Utilitas* 22.4 (2010): 474-480 advances a similar objection based on a consequence of the negative thesis' indifference, but it would apply to views attaching lexical priority to sub-threshold benefits, even if they did not endorse the negative thesis.

<sup>6</sup> Those who are unmoved by the indifference objection: Kanschik, Philipp. "Why Sufficientarianism is not Indifferent to Taxation." *Kriterion* 29.2 (2015): 81-102, replies it, showing that it can endorse progressive taxation. Whereas Shields *Just Enough* does not take it to be a decisive objection to sufficientarianism, just one that dulls its prospects.

adequate explanation of the negative thesis can be given and so almost all sufficientarian views that have been advocated should be rejected. Section Four, explains the implications of this conclusion for sufficientarianism more generally by considering the possibility of distinctive sufficiency thresholds that are not characterized by the negative thesis. The section argues that there are such shift-sufficientarian views, which hold that we have reasons of distributive justice to be concerned with supra-threshold distributions, but they are different in nature from our reasons to be concerned with sub-threshold distributions. Unlike previous work defending the “shift”, this paper offers a decisive rejection of that view based on a deep examination of the negative thesis.<sup>7</sup> The paper therefore represents a significant contribution to the debate about the demands of distributive justice. Section Five, summarises and concludes.

## II

Almost all self-identifying sufficientarians endorse both the “positive thesis” and the “negative thesis”.<sup>8</sup> According to the positive thesis, we have weighty reasons to ensure people secure enough of some goods. According to the negative thesis, no distributive principles apply to the distribution of benefits and burdens once everyone has secured enough.<sup>9</sup>

The most famous attempt to motivate the negative thesis is Roger Crisp’s “Beverly Hills Case.”<sup>10</sup> Crisp imagines that we can distribute fine wine (and its attending welfare benefits) to one of two groups of well-off individuals: the *Rich* and *Super-Rich*. Here we should not be misled by

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<sup>7</sup> Shields, *Just Enough*.

<sup>8</sup> Casal, Paula. "Why sufficiency is not enough."

<sup>9</sup> Aggregative criteria might apply. See Crisp, Roger. "Equality, priority, and compassion." *Ethics* 113.4 (2003): 745-763. "One plausible view is utilitarianism above the threshold, but it is important to note that basing distribution on compassion below the threshold has no implication for what should happen above" p. 758 and Shields "Prospects for Sufficientarianism: 103 and *Just Enough* 2016: 22.

<sup>10</sup> Crisp Equality, priority and compassion: 755. and Crisp, Roger. "Egalitarianism and compassion." *Ethics* 114.1 (2003): 119-126: 120

the labels. We can view these groups as being well-off in whatever respect matters and not merely materially or economically well-off. When faced with this distributive problem, Crisp claims that “there would be nothing to choose between the two distributions.”<sup>11</sup> In a subsequent paper, this is explained further.

“One of the main points I was trying to bring out with this example was that any prioritarian, or indeed egalitarian, concern tails off entirely as the individuals one is considering reach a certain level of well-being or welfare. There is something absurd about claiming that equality or justice requires that the Rich be benefited instead of the Super-rich.”<sup>12</sup>

Since almost all sufficientarians endorse the negative thesis, they may reason similarly about their own favoured threshold.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, critics put forward a different example and report opposite intuitions. These intuitions have as their focus the putatively implausible attitude of indifference that upper-limit sufficientarianism recommends for supra-threshold distributions. For example, Casal states that

“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,

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<sup>11</sup> Crisp Equality, priority and compassion, pp. 755

<sup>12</sup> Crisp, “Egalitarianism and compassion”, p. 120

<sup>13</sup> For example, Nielsen, Lasse. “What Is Our Real Concern with Real Inequality” cites an example, which is analogous to Crisp’s from Feldstein, Martin. 1999. “Reducing Poverty, not Inequality.” *The Public Interest* 137: 33–41 approvingly

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.”<sup>14</sup>

The example supposedly yields the opposite intuition: that we do have reasons to care about the unequal distribution of supra-threshold benefits and burdens contrary to the negative thesis. The claim underlying this intuition can be stated as the Indifference Objection: sufficientarianism is intuitively implausible because it is objectionably indifferent to inequalities once everyone has secured enough. At the first stage, then, this debate took place at an intuitive level.

While some sufficientarians are unmoved by the Indifference Objection, others do accept that indifference can be counter-intuitive and have developed versions of upper-limit sufficientarianism that they claim are invulnerable, or less vulnerable, to the Indifference Objection and other objections.<sup>15</sup> These new versions affirm the existence of multiple sufficiency thresholds and there are two types.

Some have argued for *Multiple Sufficiency Thresholds* within a single currency.<sup>16</sup> A compelling version of this view is defended by Robert Huseby.<sup>17</sup> Huseby is a welfarist who defends a low threshold of basic needs and a high threshold of welfare set at ‘contentedness’, which he claims can accommodate our intuitions about troubling inequalities among the well-off and thus avoids the force of the Indifference Objection.<sup>18</sup> The explanation of why this view could avoid the

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<sup>14</sup> Casal “Why sufficiency is not enough” 307.

<sup>15</sup> Lasse Nielsen “What’s Wrong with Sufficiency?” discusses these two versions and Fourie distinguishes Pattern Pluralism and Distributive Pluralism in her “Sufficiency: a Primer”.

<sup>16</sup> Benbaji, Yitzhak. "Sufficiency or priority?." *European Journal of Philosophy* 14.3 (2006): 327-348; Casal, ‘Why sufficiency is not enough’; Huseby, Robert. "Sufficiency: restated and defended." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18.2 (2010): 178-197.

<sup>17</sup> R. Huseby, ‘Sufficiency: Restated and Defended’.

<sup>18</sup> In responding to an objection like the Indifference Objection Huseby, “Sufficiency: restated and defended”: 183 states, “The version of sufficiency that I have presented here is not vulnerable to this objection. It is not blind to all

objection makes essential reference to the highly plausible claim that our own welfare assessments can depend on how well off we are *relative* to others. In other words: our subjective welfare is sensitive to inequality, even if we are well off. So, if Sarah is above the threshold and some windfall were to benefit everyone but Sarah, Sarah's subjective welfare may fall below the threshold, even though she is not absolutely worse off than she was prior to the windfall in terms of the currency of the windfall, say, income, as a consequence. If the threshold is set at 'contentedness', then the sufficiency principle will often identify as objectionable those inequalities that generally cause people to be less than sufficiently contented, which in Sarah's case was the fact that others benefitted from the windfall and not her. Insofar as indifference to Sarah's disadvantage is counter-intuitive, Huseby's innovation appears to show that critics overstate the implausibility of sufficientarianism. More generally, if cases like Sarah's are the only or most counterintuitive implications associated with the Indifference Objection, it would be much less forceful against this version of Multiple Sufficiency Thresholds.<sup>19</sup>

Others have argued for *Sufficiency in Multiple Currencies*. According to this view, justice demands that individuals secure enough in more than one currency and so we should not be indifferent about distributions once everyone has secured enough of *one* currency.<sup>20</sup> Instead, we should care about securing enough in the other currencies too. Proponents of Sufficiency in Multiple Currencies allege that, since supra-threshold inequalities in one currency can create insufficiency in another currency, such principles can condemn the supra-threshold inequality as unjust and therefore avoid what was thought to be counter-intuitive about sufficientarianism.<sup>21</sup>

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kinds of differences in welfare levels. The relative deprivation of the person left behind in Holtug's scenario, makes it very hard to for her to be content in an environment in which she is considerably worse off than others."

<sup>19</sup> I do think there are further problems with this view, but it is not necessary for me to explain them to support the argument of this paper.

<sup>20</sup> Axelsen and Nielsen call this "Aspect Pluralism" in their "Essentially Enough"

<sup>21</sup> Axelsen, David V., and Lasse Nielsen. "Sufficiency as freedom from duress." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 23.4 (2015): 406-42

An excellent example of Sufficiency in Multiple Currencies is given by David Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen in their paper “Sufficiency as Freedom from Duress.”<sup>22</sup> Axelsen and Nielsen argue that justice requires that individuals are free from duress. An individual is free from duress when they are not subject to *significant* pressure and do not face *significant* obstacles in achieving success in *central aspects of human life*.<sup>23</sup> Axelsen and Nielsen argue that insofar as inequalities should concern us, it is for reasons to do with insufficiency. One reason for this, they argue, is because of the positional or relational logics of some capabilities.<sup>24</sup> Having less than someone else in some respect usually means you do not have enough in another respect. To illustrate, they give the example of political freedoms.<sup>25</sup> Unequal political freedoms, such as an unequal number of votes, may lead to insufficiency of self-respect, which is a central aspect of human life. Therefore, the injustice of inequality in political freedoms, even where one has enough political freedom, can be explained, instrumentally, by insufficiency in self-respect. Likewise, the view is able to explain that inequalities in material wealth may translate into insufficiencies in important dimensions because they lead to a deficiency in control over one’s life or a deficiency in self-respect. In this way, an intuitively troubling inequality in some currency can be judged as problematic by their view *because* and *when* it is an insufficiency in some other currency. So, the view would not be indifferent to these cases and so, not counter-intuitive. By limiting the range of cases in which they

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> See Ibid: 407, for “Freedom from duress, then, entails freeing people from significant pressure in certain central areas of human life, while others are to be considered beyond the scope of justice.”

<sup>24</sup> Ibid: 420. “One’s absolute position may, thus, be determined by one’s relative position, in which case a person may become insufficiently free because of relative deprivation—but it is the insufficiency that creates a problem, not the inequality in itself. Indeed, most often when distributive egalitarians point to unjust inequalities, these are actually positionally determined insufficiencies, we claim.”

<sup>25</sup> Ibid: 420. “Thus, when the aristocracy is given two votes while the plebs retain only one, this inequality affects the social basis of self-respect of the plebs and their capability for engaging in respectful relations with their societal peers in an absolute sense. Akin to relational egalitarians and in tune with the notion of positional goods, then, we affirm that an unequal distribution may generate insufficiency and place people under duress but not due to the distributive inequality itself.”

recommend indifference, Axelsen and Nielsen may appear to have diminished the force of the indifference objection and, like Huseby, fought back against the intuitive case against sufficientarianism.

However, both Sufficiency in Multiple Currencies and Multiple Sufficiency Thresholds retain the negative thesis and hold that once enough is secured, no distributive principles apply to the distribution of benefits and burdens. This means that even the more sophisticated views must remain indifferent to some distributions of benefits and burdens. For Huseby, we should be indifferent to distributions of benefits and burdens that do not threaten our contentedness. This might include economic windfalls in cases where those who do not benefit never find out about this windfall or feel themselves to be unworthy of the benefit. For Axelsen and Nielsen, there are two types of supra-threshold inequality that we ought to be indifferent towards. The first type are inequalities of obstacles or pressures in achieving success in central aspects of human life. Such inequalities are consistent with distributive justice so long as the obstacles or pressures are not *significant*. The second type of supra-threshold inequalities are inequalities in significant obstacles or pressures in achieving success. Such inequalities are also consistent with distributive justice so long as they are not in relation to *central aspects of human life*. In short, inequalities can be significant, so long as they are not central, and they can be central so long as they are not significant. Permitted inequalities may include inequalities in some quality of life enhancing medical care, public health initiative or educational programs. It might also include improved gardening and recreational spaces or even diminishing criminal or anti-social behaviour. Since the indifference remains, it seems possible to construct a counter-example along similar lines to Casal's hospital example and to raise the intuition that indifference there is also implausible.

The debate about sufficientarianism has and continues to be focussed on the intuitive implications of the negative thesis. Some find indifference, even in these later examples, counter-intuitive. Others firmly deny that the negative thesis is counter-intuitive in at least these cases. But there are also those who are not sure what to make of any intuitive responses they have, as well as those who are generally sceptical of the use of intuitions about cases to support or reject to philosophical positions. Whichever position one takes, indifference towards those with enough requires some explanation and not merely intuitive appraisal.

To see why explanation of the negative thesis and the indifference it recommends is required for a decisive verdict, consider that indifference to supra-threshold distributions raises the question of why we should be indifferent to the distribution of seemingly important benefits and burdens that are consequential for how people's lives go and how they fare relative to others. With the debate as it is, with intuitions offered in support for both sides, it remains open for either side to provide an explanation of those intuitions that could either affirm them or debunk them. Without any explanation the negative thesis would remain mysterious at best, so intuitions about the negative thesis without an explanation of indifference are insufficient. Moreover, if a convincing explanation of the negative thesis can be provided then the intuitive implausibility of indifference, if that's what it is, could be defended and the view would seem less implausible. But if it could be argued that no acceptable explanation could possibly be provided, then that would give us reason to reject the negative thesis even if it seems intuitively plausible to be indifferent about inequalities among the well off. So, whether we think indifference is intuitive or counter-intuitive, and even if we are not sure, an explanation of the appropriateness of indifference is necessary and that explanation would be sufficient to settle the debate. The predominant focus on intuitive reactions

to cases has thus obscured what really matters in this debate, which is whether the negative thesis can be adequately explained. I now turn to examine the available explanations for indifference.

### III

Upper-limit sufficientarians do not agree on how benefits and burdens should be distributed below the threshold. Nor do they agree on how much is enough or how high the threshold is. The central distinctive claim of upper-limit sufficientarianism concerns supra-threshold distributions and is captured by the negative thesis. Moreover, the sufficiency threshold itself is the distinctive idea within the broader family of views of sufficientarianism and so, what is distinctive about those views, and thereby upper-limit sufficientarianism, is the difference that being above or below the threshold, should make to distributive justice. Whether they are above or below the sufficiency threshold must make some difference to how we treat a person in matters of distribution if sufficientarianism is to have anything to contribute to our understanding of the demands of distributive justice. The question is ‘what kind of difference does it make?’ The negative thesis holds that above the threshold we should be indifferent to their position, though below it we should care a great deal. This is a profound difference indeed. But why would it be appropriate to be indifferent? How can this profound difference be explained?

One possible explanation is that no principles of distributive justice apply to the distribution of benefits and burdens above the threshold *because* supra-threshold distributions of benefits and burdens are not relevant to justice. There is some textual support for this explanation, though no one has explicitly defended it. In “Equality as a Moral Ideal”, Frankfurt states that “if everyone had enough it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others.” Saying something is of no “moral consequence” is, it seems, a denial of the moral-salience of that thing.

The justice-analogue of that claim is that supra-threshold distributions are of no “consequence for justice”. Paula Casal, in “Why sufficiency is not enough” states that the negative thesis “denies the relevance of certain additional distributive requirements”, presumably the denial refers to the relevance of distributive requirements to justice.<sup>26</sup> In Lasse Nielsen’s “What is wrong with sufficiency?” he states, more directly, that “inequalities above that level are irrelevant to justice.”<sup>27</sup> Given the textual support for this possible explanation of the negative thesis, we ought to carefully consider its plausibility.

If this explanation is convincing, if supra-threshold distributions are not relevant to justice, then that could explain away the apparently counter-intuitive implications that critics have pointed to. Any intuitions from cases about those distributions could not tell for or against any account of the demands of justice and therefore could not tell against upper-limit sufficientarianism. To see this consider a different sort of example from political philosophy. It may be counter-intuitive to think that individuals have a permission to extract inequality exacerbating incentives from their employers, but if justice is restricted, in a crude way, to the basic structure and not concerned with individuals’ legally uncoerced actions, then this case is not relevant to justice and the intuitions solicited from it cannot tell for or against a principle of justice.<sup>28</sup> The irrelevance of the cases from which intuitive reactions are elicited would also render irrelevant any argumentative force they might otherwise have.

Moreover, to lessen the force of the indifference objection further, defenders of this explanation might argue that the counter-intuitive implications can be explained by non-justice

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<sup>26</sup> Casal p. 298

<sup>27</sup> Nielsen, L. “What’s wrong with sufficiency?”, *Res Publica*, online first. P. 3.

<sup>28</sup> For the basic structure see Rawls, J., *Justice as Fairness: a restatement* (Harvard University Press, 2001). 24. For critique see G. A. Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 116-150; M. Ronzoni, ‘Two Concepts of Basic Structure, and their Relevance to Global Justice’, *Global Justice: Theory, Practice and Rhetoric*, 1 (2007), 68-85; M. Ronzoni, ‘What Makes the Basic Structure Just?’, *Res Publica*, 14 (2008), 203-218; A. Williams, ‘Incentives, Inequality and Publicity’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 27 (1998), 225-247.

based reasons. So, for example, we have reasons of distributive ethics that apply to supra-threshold distributions or norms of impartiality apply. For this reason, upper-limit sufficientarians can condemn arbitrary distributions above the threshold, just not *qua* sufficientarian nor from the point of view of justice.<sup>29</sup> The explanation that supra-threshold distributions are irrelevant to justice, therefore, seems promising, though the reason for its irrelevance would need to be spelt out further to be complete. But the irrelevant to justice explanation of the negative thesis renders the sufficiency threshold redundant, so we do not need to seek a further explanation of irrelevance itself.

If true, the claim that supra-threshold distributions are irrelevant to justice renders what was apparently a core distinctive claim indistinct. To see why, consider that, if, as the negative thesis claims, no principles of distributive justice apply to supra-threshold distributions of benefits and burdens *because* those distributions are not relevant to justice, then it is a claim about the nature of justice itself, and what is relevant and irrelevant to it. This is quite separate from which distributive principles we should favour with respect to the distributions that justice is concerned with. So understood, the negative thesis would be akin to a claim about the scope of justice. Supra-threshold distributions are irrelevant, just as distributions involving only non-compatriots are irrelevant if statism is true, and just as distributions involving only non-human animals are irrelevant if justice concerns only human to human interactions. It is therefore a claim that non-sufficientarians could endorse.<sup>30</sup> A claim that non-sufficientarians could endorse cannot be distinctively sufficientarian. Prioritarians and egalitarians about justice are just concerned about prioritizing and equalizing within the domain of justice, since their views concern distributive

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<sup>29</sup> This was suggested to me by Shlomi Segall, Yitzhak Benbaji and David Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen in conversation.

<sup>30</sup> The same objection would apply to those who think that the currency of justice is satiable, insofar as they consider themselves to be proponents of a distinctive sufficientarian view.

justice and therefore the distribution of benefits and burdens within the domain of justice. Those principles are constrained by precisely the sort of meta-claim that this explanation of the negative thesis makes. Principles of distributive justice operate only within the domain of justice wherever the upper-limit of justice is. Just as prioritaricians can be cosmopolitan or statist, welfarist or resourcist, they could also accept that supra-threshold distributions are not relevant to justice. So, on this understanding there need be no disagreement between upper-limit sufficientarianism and prioritarian or maximizing principles, about the truth of the negative thesis.

This is not to say that the claim that supra- threshold distributions are irrelevant to justice is not a distinctive claim, per se. The claim that there is a threshold of sufficiency and above that distributions are not relevant to justice is not a claim that prioritaricians and egalitarians generally endorse, and we might call this sufficientarianism about the scope of justice, but it would not be sufficientarianism about distributive justice. The truth of this justice irrelevant explanation, then, would not be a victory for sufficientarianism as we know it. It would, instead, be to reclassify sufficientarianism as a completely different kind of theory.

To be a sound account of distributive justice, upper-limit sufficientarianism cannot have as its core distinctive claim the justice irrelevant explanation of the negative thesis. But, since supra-threshold benefits must, as a matter of logic, be relevant or irrelevant to justice, that answer entails that upper-limit sufficientarians must be committed to the justice relevance of supra-threshold distributions and any explanation of why we should be indifferent to supra-threshold distributions must be consistent with that. That supra-threshold distributions are relevant to justice is suggested, or at least consistent with, the definition of the negative thesis given by Casal, who most people follow, when she states that the negative thesis “denies the relevance of certain additional distributive requirements” and rejects “egalitarian and prioritarian reasoning at least above some

critical threshold.”<sup>31</sup> Crisp’s statement that “There is something absurd about claiming that equality or justice requires that the Rich be benefited instead of the Super-rich is similarly compatible with each.”<sup>32</sup> These statements fall short of rejecting that justice applies to the distribution of the benefits.

To avoid redundancy, sufficientarians must accept that supra-threshold distributions of benefits and burdens are relevant to justice. But when combined with the negative thesis, we are forced to describe the position in a very suspicious way, as follows: we should be indifferent to supra-threshold distributions because they are relevant to justice. A better way of phrasing this is to say that “we should be indifferent to supra-threshold benefits *even though* they are relevant to justice” and this statement captures the problematic nature of this remaining explanation of the negative thesis. One cannot hold both that some distributions are justice-relevant and that it doesn’t matter what those distributions look like from the point of view of justice. To say that it doesn’t matter how justice-relevant benefits are distributed from the point of view of justice is a contradiction. Wherever there are justice-salient benefits they can be distributed justly or unjustly and so it matters for justice how they are distributed. This is what it means for a distribution to be justice-relevant. This shows the incoherence of upper-limit sufficientarianism on the only interpretation where it is a view about the demands of distributive justice. It is just as incoherent as combining the reverse claims that there are justice irrelevant distributions that matter to evaluations of justice. That would be like saying, justice is concerned only with human to human relations, and yet insisting there can be justice for animals too.

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<sup>31</sup> Casal “Why sufficiency is not enough” p. 298 and 299. See also Huseby Sufficiency: restated and defended” p. 179, who claims that the negative thesis “denies that either priority or equality has any role to play” above the threshold; Shields “Prospects for Sufficiency”: 103 for “once everyone has secured enough no distributive criteria apply to benefits (though wholly aggregative criteria may apply.” and Shields, *Just Enough*: 22 “no distributive principles apply to benefits among those who have secured enough.

<sup>32</sup> Crisp “Egalitarianism and compassion” p. 120

It is possible that, on some views, there is some strong presumption against re-distribution, for example, pre-existing property rights might mean that re-distribution cannot take place to benefit those who have enough. This would be a substantive commitment and one that would narrow the scope of upper-limit sufficientarianism and would require serious defence. But even this sort of view involves a balancing of two values that seem relevant to distributive justice. While property rights or presumption of ownership might provide us with a strong presumption against redistribution to the well off, they do not below the threshold, or else there would be no distributive justice there either. Perhaps there is always some reason against redistribution but because people's claims are stronger below the threshold they can be overridden. Again, this does not imply that no distributive justice applies above the threshold. Quite the opposite, it implies that distributive justice requires a balancing of competing considerations which could come down on either side and above the threshold the weight of these competing considerations changes significantly. So, the incoherence of the relevant to justice explanation of the negative thesis is not merely apparent but real and unavoidable.

In this section I have examined the ways in which upper-limit sufficientarians might explain why indifference is appropriate above the threshold through an assessment of the status of supra-threshold distributions. I have shown that if we suppose that supra-threshold distributions are relevant to justice then the sufficiency threshold becomes redundant. To avoid redundancy sufficientarians must accept that supra-threshold distributions are irrelevant to justice. But then upper-limit sufficientarianism becomes incoherent because the negative thesis and the claim that supra-threshold distributions are irrelevant to justice are incompatible. Since the justice relevant and justice irrelevant explanations of the negative thesis are both unacceptable and exhaust the

logical possibilities for how we can regard supra-threshold distributions, the negative thesis, and therefore upper-limit sufficientarianism, cannot be adequately explained and must be rejected.

The discussion so far has shown that the debate about the intuitive plausibility of indifference has, to some extent, obscured the real and much more serious problem with upper-limit sufficientarianism, that it is either incoherent or redundant, and that we should reject it decisively. But where does this leave sufficientarianism? I now turn to this question.

#### **IV**

That upper-limit sufficientarianism is either redundant or incoherent should lead us to ask whether sufficientarianism, more generally, should be abandoned. If, as may seem to be the case, upper-limit sufficientarianism really is the only kind of sufficientarianism, then we should consider that position seriously flawed in general. But conceiving of sufficientarianism so narrowly is a mistake that would deprive us of many interesting, plausible and distinctive positions in distributive justice that appeal to the special importance of securing enough. The availability of such positions provides further reason, if needed, to reject the negative thesis, for most of what upper-limit sufficientarians find attractive about that view can be found in alternative versions that reject the negative thesis.

I propose that the essence of sufficientarianism is a commitment to the special importance of securing enough of some goods, just as egalitarians give special importance to equality and prioritariness give special importance to prioritizing the worse off. This special importance can be captured by attributing both positive weight to securing enough rather than less than enough, as the positive thesis does, and by positing that once enough is secured our reasons to benefit people

further are different in their nature.<sup>33</sup> So, we can say, that the sufficiency threshold represents a shift in, and not an upper-limit to, our reasons of distributive justice and therefore the application of distributive principles. Sufficientarians, then, care about supra-threshold distributions of benefits and burdens, they should admit they are justice-relevant to avoid redundancy. But they should reject the negative thesis, which claims that it doesn't matter how those supra-threshold benefits are distributed, to avoid incoherence.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, to avoid making the trivial claim that the way we care about supra-threshold distributions and sub-threshold distributions is the same, sufficientarians should claim that the way we care is different and that difference is made by the threshold. That way the threshold does make a difference to how justice-relevant distributions are judged. It thus avoids redundancy and incoherence. Shift-sufficientarianism endorses the positive thesis, rejects the negative thesis and holds that supra-threshold distributions are governed by fundamentally different reasons than sub-threshold distributions, but both types of distribution are relevant to justice.

To further support the idea that those who formerly endorsed upper-limit sufficientarianism should endorse shift-sufficientarianism, note how easily upper-limit sufficientarians could modify their view to avoid endorsing the negative thesis. Upper-limit sufficientarians need only make a subtle change to become shift-sufficientarians and this comes with the highly significant benefit that their position avoids the problem I have points out. This would involve asserting that there are some, quite different, and possibly light-weight reasons to be non-instrumentally concerned with equality or the worse off once sufficiency is achieved. In this way, they would not be indifferent

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<sup>33</sup> In Shields *Just Enough* this is presented as the shift-thesis, and is defined by the discontinuity in the rate of change of the marginal weight of our reasons to benefit people one they have secured enough.

<sup>34</sup> This understanding builds upon the most developed account of sufficientarianism offered by Liam Shields in his, *Just Enough*. There, Shields is critical of upper-limit sufficientarianism and notes the well-known objections to it, but takes this as a reason to develop shift-sufficientarianism without noting that upper-limit sufficientarianism is incoherent. He notes that the negative thesis is a type of shift, but given that the negative thesis renders sufficientarianism as incoherent these views are not best understood as valid versions of sufficientarianism at all.

about inequality or disadvantage among the well-off and can avoid becoming either redundant or incoherent. But accepting these reasons would not commit them to making any trade-offs between benefitting those who have secured enough with those who have not by endorsing lexical priority of benefitting the least advantaged. They could, then, maintain their strong opposition to advancing the position of those with enough, when those without enough could instead be helped. For this reason, an attitude of *almost indifference* could be retained consistent with avoiding the irresistible dilemma they would otherwise face by endorsing the negative thesis. This shift-sufficientarian view fits very well with the dismissive attitude many sufficientarians have to inequalities at very high levels. While they claim that we should not give those distributions any thought, and instead focus on the plight of the badly off and put the rest out of our minds. To put the affluent out of our minds altogether, as the negative thesis would hold, would be a mistake but to put them to the very back of our minds, to extend the metaphor, does not invite the decisive objection from redundancy or incoherence.

Further, we should note that recent developments in sufficientarianism have adopted multiple thresholds and attach the negative thesis to only one such threshold, or to several when collectively met. In doing so, they already endorse at least one shift-sufficiency threshold, moving from one type of concern for distributions to another. For this reason, these sufficientarians cannot have a good theoretical reason to object to the shift as an acceptable way of construing a sufficiency threshold, since it is already contained within their views. This provides an additional reason for upper-limit sufficientarians to reject the negative thesis and welcome shift-sufficientarianism. There are shift-sufficientarian views that capture most if not all of what upper-limit sufficientarians find attractive about that view and do not admit only of interpretations that are incoherent or redundant.

More radical shifts than those I mentioned above are also possible, all of which would attach some significance to addressing inequalities and disadvantages above the threshold, but this subtle change would retain almost all of what is distinctive about sufficiency: the difference in our reasons once enough is secured and for that it would avoid the indifference objection.

Some will claim that shift-sufficientarianism is not distinct from prioritarianism and as such it faces a decisive problem faced by upper-limit sufficientarianism.<sup>35</sup> One might claim that the shift thesis renders the threshold redundant, just as the negative thesis does, but this is a mistake. While some sufficientarian views will be similar to prioritarian views, not all will, and even the most similar views are distinct. What is distinctive is the shift-thesis: once a person has enough our reasons to benefit her change in their nature. Prioritarians believe either that our reasons to benefit people diminish consistently or that our reasons to benefit people diminish inconsistently and the rate of diminution changes at a certain level of advantage. If they believe our reasons diminish consistently, they are not identical to sufficientarianism since there is no shift, and no fundamental role for sufficiency thresholds. If they believe our reasons diminish inconsistently they can be called sufficientarian only if sufficiency has a fundamental role for them in determining the change in the weight of demands of distributive justice. Again, this turns on explanations. They must explain why the rate changes and why it changes where it does. Invoking a sufficiency threshold seems a plausible way to do this, though perhaps not the only way. Needless to say, insofar as they do, they adopt sufficientarianism by granting an indispensable role to considerations of sufficiency in their account of distributive justice.

But sufficientarians do not have to hold a view that is consistent with the general prioritarian claim that the worse off a person is the more important it is to benefit her. As well as

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<sup>35</sup> Axelsen and Nielson in “Essentially Enough” p. 111 and Kantisch “Why Sufficientarianism is not Indifferent to Taxation”. 89 agree that the shift betrays the motivation for the sufficiency view.

those positions, sufficientarianism includes positions that state that once people have secured enough we should distribute benefits and burdens in a way that is sensitive to equality or responsibility or desert. This change or shift in the nature of our reasons of distributive justice is what makes sufficientarianism distinctive. So it is not true to say that sufficientarianism is indistinct or that the shift thesis is equally redundant as the negative thesis.

## V

The contribution of this paper was to show that almost all versions of sufficientarianism that have been advocated since the publication of Harry Frankfurt's "Equality as a Moral Ideal" should be rejected. This is not, as critics have claimed, because the negative thesis has intuitively implausible implications, but rather it is because, upon closer inspection, the negative thesis is either incoherent or renders upper-limit sufficientarianism redundant. However, rather than rejecting sufficientarianism entirely, our response should be to develop and defend alternative versions of sufficientarianism, those that see sufficiency thresholds as a shift in our reasons of distributive justice and not an upper-limit to them.

I began by explaining that the debate between sufficientarians and their critics has proceeded on the basis that a demonstration of intuitive plausibility or implausibility could be sufficient to settle the matter. But this is a mistake. While we can still form judgements about the intuitive plausibility of the view by carefully weighing these intuitions, any judgement we come to on this basis can be conclusive only with further explanation. What is needed is an explanation of why the indifference that the negative thesis requires is appropriate. If one can be found, then the counter-intuitive implications of upper-limit sufficientarianism can be explained away. If one cannot be found, as I have argued, then upper-limit sufficientarianism should be rejected.

Sufficientarians have suggested that the negative thesis can be explained by appeal to the justice-irrelevance of supra-threshold distributions. However, this explanation makes sufficientarianism a position about where justice applies and renders that position indistinct from its traditional rivals: equality and priority and therefore redundant. To avoid such redundancy, then, sufficientarians endorsing the negative thesis must also hold the supra-threshold distributions are justice-relevant. But this claim entails that there are distributions that are a concern of justice, which do not require principle of distributive justice to assess them. This is incoherent. Given that the negative thesis must judgement supra-threshold distributions as either 'justice relevant' or 'justice irrelevant', the upper-limit sufficientarians who endorse it hold an indistinct or incoherent position.

Finally, I considered the implications this has for sufficientarianism more generally. I showed that sufficientarianism should not be rejected in general because there are views that retain a distinctive and coherent commitment to the importance of sufficiency as a demand of distributive justice. These shift-sufficientarian accounts hold that once enough is secured we have positive reasons to be concerned with the distribution of benefits and burdens, though they are of a different kind to the reasons we have to be concerned that individuals secure enough. Moreover, since there are versions of shift-sufficientarianism that retain an attitude of almost indifference, very little is lost by adopting these views rather than the upper-limit sufficientarian view, and much is gained in that the shift-sufficientarian view does not face the same dilemma as upper-limit sufficientarianism. Though there are some questions we should ask about the intuitive plausibility of shift-sufficientarianism, it is at least distinctive and coherent and so, if we are going to be sufficientarians these are the sorts of sufficientarians we should be.

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