Sufficiency Principle

Liam Shields

The sufficiency principle provides an answer to normative questions about the distribution of benefits and burdens. The principle is discussed in debates about distributive justice and distributive ethics, as well as applied debates about education, healthcare, transport, and information and library science.

While many philosophers working in this area have advocated equality in the distribution of benefits and burdens (*see* EQUALITY; EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY), others have advocated the sufficiency principle instead. The distinction between these principles is plain enough. Principles of equality call for an equal distribution of benefits and burdens, while principles of sufficiency call for everyone to have enough, whether or not that is equal. In spite of the simplicity of the idea of sufficiency, and its regular use in everyday discussions, the principle raises many philosophical questions. I will first explain the history of the sufficiency principle before going on to summarize the main debates about its definition and plausibility.

History of the Sufficiency Principle

The history of the sufficiency principle begins with Harry Frankfurt's seminal paper "Equality as a Moral Ideal" (1987). Philosophers had discussed the special importance of sufficiency before Frankfurt. Notably, the idea is present in John Locke's famous proviso for the acquisition of unowned property, whereby an unowned object can become owned by an individual "mixing their labour with it," but only if the act of appropriation would leave "enough and as good" for others (1988 [1690]: Ch. 5, para. 33). The proviso is still discussed by contemporary libertarian thinkers (*see* LIBERALISM; LIBERTARIANISM). Furthermore, John Rawls discusses the social minimum as a rival to the difference principle in *A Theory of Justice* (1971: sect. 49). But Frankfurt's paper marks a watershed in the history of the sufficiency principle because it is the first concerted effort to describe an entirely sufficiency-based alternative to egalitarian theories of distributive justice/ethics. It is also worth noting a parallel set of debates about so-called "satisficing" (*see* SATISFICING) theories of rationality, which holds that it can be rational to seek a "good enough" rather than a "maximal" or "optimal" outcome. Though debates about sufficiency and satisficing have mainly progressed independently, the sufficiency principle often makes use of the notions of satisfaction and satiability. This suggests that debates about one will be relevant to the other.

In "Equality as a Moral Ideal," Frankfurt first puts forward a critique of economic equality as a moral ideal before sketching his alternative: the doctrine of sufficiency.

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He argues that a widespread belief in economic equality contributes to the shallowness of our time because it leads us to view our own entitlements in terms of what others have, rather than what is required for us to pursue our own authentic goals. This rejection of the fundamental importance of comparisons is a central component of many arguments in favor of sufficiency principles. Frankfurt also argues that because a principle of strict equality would lead to highly implausible outcomes in cases of scarcity, we have further reasons to reject equality as a moral ideal. He uses the following example to illustrate this point: if we have only forty units of medicine and there are ten people, each of whom needs five units of medicine to cure an otherwise fatal illness, an equal distribution would cure no one. A sufficient distribution, on the other hand, would cure eight of them, thus delivering the intuitively correct verdict.

More positively, Frankfurt argues for what he calls "the doctrine of sufficiency," according to which each person should have enough such that she is content, or is reasonably content, with having no more than she has. For this person, having more money is inessential to her being satisfied with her life. This leads us to Frankfurt's striking statement that, "if everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others" (1987: 21). Frankfurt goes on to develop this line of thought in further papers, linking the idea of sufficiency, rather than equality, to the idea of respect (1997; 2000). Frankfurt's positive contribution has been highly influential in at least three ways. First, almost all self-identifying sufficientarians adopt the anti-egalitarian spirit of Frankfurt's view (some foreshadowing of this thought can be found in Lucas 1965). Second, the indifferent attitude toward supra-threshold benefits is also widespread among sufficientarians. Third, many of the most prominent accounts of sufficientarianism focus on contentment or subjective well-being as the currency of sufficientarianism (see, e.g., Benbaji 2005; Huseby 2010). But before I discuss the varieties of sufficiency that have been developed since Frankfurt, I will summarize the discussion of the definition of a sufficiency principle.

Definition of the Sufficiency Principle

The basic idea of the sufficiency principle as a moral demand is that securing enough is of special importance. Whether a person has enough affects our reasons to consider that person as a potential beneficiary or burden bearer. But what precisely does this mean?

Paula Casal (2007) spells out the central claims that sufficientarians have made in an attempt to define that family of positions. She argues that sufficientarians tend to endorse both a positive and a negative thesis. According to the positive thesis, it is especially important to be above some threshold and thereby avoid deprivation (2007: 298–9). This makes sense of positions that emphasize the importance of having basic needs met, for example. According to the negative thesis, once enough has been secured, additional distributive demands, such as equality or priority, do not apply (2007: 289). This makes sense of Frankfurt's claim that, "if everyone had enough, then it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others" (1987: 21).

Although Casal also examines the possibility of relaxing the negative thesis, some have taken the combination of the positive and negative thesis to be definitive of the sufficiency principle. Moreover, as a matter of description of the literature, almost all versions of the sufficiency principles that have been advocated take this form. Liam Shields (2016) has argued for a broader definition of the sufficiency principle. According to Shields, a sufficiency principle entails commitment to the positive thesis that securing enough is a weighty and fundamental demand of distributive justice/ethics and the shift thesis that, once enough is secured, there is a "shift" in our fundamental reasons of distributive justice/ethics to benefit that person (2016: 26–30). This permits combination with the negative thesis as one type of "shift," but allows other positions that express concern with those who have secured enough. Shields's view is therefore more inclusive and since very many positions in distributive justice/ethics endorse a minimal threshold of basic needs or capabilities, critics argue that this definition renders sufficiency principles no longer distinctive (Axelsen and Nielsen 2017: 110; Deveaux 2018: 100; Kanschik 2015: 89; Nielsen 2017; Vandamme 2017).

Varieties of Sufficiency

We can identify three main ways in which sufficiency principles admit of variations. The first concerns the guidance they offer below the threshold. The second concerns the guidance they offer above the threshold, though those endorsing the negative thesis as definitive of a sufficiency principle will not admit variations on this dimension. The third concerns how much is enough, the placement of the threshold. There are other differences, such as whether the principle is global in scope or applies only within state boundaries (*see* GLOBAL DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE), but these are not distinctive to sufficiency principles.

Sufficientarians have favored one of two types of guidance below the threshold. Some have advocated maximizing the incidence of sufficiency (Dorsey 2008; Page 2007; Roemer 2004). According to this view, we should act in ways that will maximize the number of people who have secured enough. A more common view is to give priority to the worse-off below the threshold (*see* PRIORITARIANISM). This priority can be absolute or weighted. According to absolute priority, we ought to maximize the position of the least advantaged individual below the threshold. According to weighted priority, the importance of improving the position of the worst-off below the threshold is given more weight, but can be outweighed if we are able to improve the position of others who are greater in number or by a greater extent. Each of these sets of guidance below the threshold resembles a version of prioritarianism.

In terms of the guidance above the threshold, almost all sufficientarians endorse the negative thesis and hold that, once an individual has secured enough, we can be indifferent to their plight. These have been called versions of upper-limit sufficientarianism, because they see sufficiency as placing a limit on our distributive concern (Shields 2016). However, so-called shift sufficientarians endorse the shift thesis and hold that further reasons apply to those who have secured enough. These views are open to a wide range of guidance above the threshold, so long as it is fundamentally different from guidance below. For example, someone could endorse equality, prioritarianism, or desert above the threshold. Campbell Brown (2005) endorses priority. Rawls's difference principle combines egalitarian and prioritarian elements by permitting deviations from equality only when they satisfy prioritarian requirements (*see* DIFFERENCE PRINCIPLE).

With respect to the placement of the threshold and the answer to the question of how much is enough, there are two popular answers: basic capabilities and contentment as subjective welfare. The advocates of welfare, particularly subjective welfare or utility, contribute to debates about axiology and follow Frankfurt closely (see Blackorby et al. 1997; Hirose 2014). Those who defend capabilities, such as David Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen (2015), follow Amartya Sen (1980) and Martha Nussbaum (2011). The capabilities approach is often taken to have a special relationship with sufficiency in that either one is capable or one is not. This appears to establish a conceptual congruence between the distributive principle and its currency. Capabilities theories disagree about which capabilities it is necessary to possess in order to have enough. Axelsen and Nielsen (2015) use the ideal of freedom from duress to give coherence to their favored set of capabilities, while Nussbaum (2011) provides a list of ten capabilities.

Objections to Sufficiency Principles

There is no shortage of objections to various versions of the sufficiency principle. I discuss three below.

According to the upward transfers objection, sufficiency principles are objectionable when they give priority to improving the situation of the better-off at the expense of the worse-off. For example, imagine two individuals. One is barely meeting her basic needs, though she is struggling to do so and would not require much help to do so in a more sustained way; the other is desperately badly off, suffering from a number of health conditions, is close to death, and would need a large amount of help to reach a threshold of a minimally decent life. If, since it will take fewer additional resources, we can help the first individual to reach the threshold, but not the second, then, according to headcount sufficientarianism, we ought to transfer resources from the worse-off individual, who can never meet the threshold, to the better-off individual, who can meet the threshold. This strikes many as deeply implausible (Arneson 2006; Casal 2007; Temkin 2003), but it can be avoided since it applies only to those who wish to maximize the incidence of sufficiency rather than those who wish to diminish the shortfall from sufficiency. Most sufficientarians do not adopt views that are vulnerable to this objection.

According to the indifference objection, sufficiency principles are objectionable when they yield conclusions of indifference toward those who have secured enough. For example, if everyone has secured enough, then some sufficiency principles – those that endorse the negative thesis – will hold that benefits and burdens can be distributed unequally or in ways that benefit those with the most, without being ethically bad or unjust. This too strikes many as deeply implausible (Arneson 2006; Casal 2007; Holtug, 2007). To illustrate this point, imagine that there are two groups, millionaires and billionaires, and imagine that some taxes must be raised to maintain the upkeep of the town they live in, perhaps including vital infrastructure, such as bridges and hospitals, or paying the wages of public servants, such as the police. It strikes many as preposterous that we should allocate tax liability randomly rather than in accordance with some progressive principles, whereby billionaires pay more than millionaires. Certainly, it strikes many critics as implausible to hold that allocating all liability to millionaires and none to billionaires is as just as allocating the liability in proportion to the wealth of different individuals.

Some sufficientarians believe indifference to inequality among the very well-off to be a key attraction of their view. This is especially true of those who set a very high threshold (Crisp 2003). Rather than denying the force of this objection, some have sought to develop views that avoid it by adopting multiple thresholds so that inequalities above one threshold might be condemned by inequalities below another. For example, Axelsen and Nielsen (2015) argue that inequalities in wealth, even above a high threshold, might lead to insufficiency in political power or self-respect due to the "positional nature" of some capabilities. Philipp Kanschik (2015) claims, more generally, that sufficientarianism is not vulnerable to this objection by looking at the idea of progressive taxation. He claims that the sufficiency principle can support progressive taxation above the threshold as a way of minimizing the risk of individuals falling below the threshold. Karl Widerquist (2010) discusses this idea of the risk of falling below the threshold and argues that it will lead the sufficiency principle to become a social maximum, because all resources will be used to minimize the risk of falling below.

According to the high–low threshold distinction, sufficiency principles face a dilemma (Casal 2007). The lower the threshold, the more plausible the positive thesis that we should give absolute or very weighty priority to those below it, but the less plausible it is to say that we should be indifferent to those above it, as the negative thesis holds. The higher the threshold, the more plausible indifference is, but the less plausible it is to say we should give it absolute or very weighty priority. Securing a threshold of basic needs may seem like an especially important and urgent moral demand, but it is not plausible to suggest that once basic needs are met we should be indifferent. A threshold of a flourishing life, on the other hand, may be a point beyond which it is implausible to care about inequality; securing it, however, is not one of the more weighty and urgent moral demands. In response, some have defended two thresholds, arguing for a low threshold, which captures the urgency of securing enough expressed by the positive thesis, and a high threshold, which captures the indifference expressed by the negative thesis (Axelsen and Nielsen 2015; Benbaji 2006; Casal 2007; Huseby 2010).

A related criticism about the placement of the threshold states that the thresholds used by sufficiency principles are problematically vague about the placement of the threshold and arbitrary in its justification (Arneson 2006; Casal 2007). Vagueness is a major problem for those who are trying to intuitively assess the principle based on its implications, because the marginal cases, the ones that are the biggest test for sufficientarianism, cannot be identified with any precision. The worry about this, then, is that sufficientarianism avoids counterintuitive implications only by moving the threshold around within the vague space. If the view cannot be pinned down, then it cannot be objected to decisively, but it also cannot guide us where we might need it most. The problem of arbitrariness is different. Arbitrariness expresses a worry about the lack of grounding for the placement of a threshold. Since such thresholds always exist on a continuum of more or less of something, identifying a precise point where someone has enough invites the question of why it is exactly where it is, rather than slightly higher or slightly lower. While it might appear plausible, *prima facie*, to say that there are important thresholds that are relevant to distribution, the question of why exactly the threshold is placed where it is has proved a hard one to answer. This worry is compounded when we consider that the threshold, on most sufficientarian views, is supposed to make a profound difference to the way we assess benefits and burdens. For many, it is the point beyond which we should be indifferent. So, the issue of exactly where the threshold is is one that has very high stakes and so we should expect to have a non-arbitrary grounding for its placement. Little has been said to address this point, and it is not clear how much can be said about it. By way of a defense, some have argued that other principles suffer from the same or similar objections and so, in this respect, the sufficiency principle is no worse than other principles of distributive justice/ethics (Page 2007). Shields has suggested that by fleshing out the precise reasons that ground the threshold, we can avoid arbitrariness and reduce vagueness (Shields 2012).

Conclusion

In this entry I have provided a summary of the history of, as well as the definition of and debates about, the sufficiency principle. In short, the sufficiency principle articulates a standard against which we can assess distributions, which draws on our intuitive and ordinary language use of sufficiency. The principle comes in several forms and all of them face important objections.

See also: DIFFERENCE PRINCIPLE; EQUALITY; EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY; GLOBAL DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE; LIBERALISM; LIBERTARIANISM; PRIORITARIANISM; SATISFICING

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