

Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough *

“So distribution should undo excess
And each man have enough.”
Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 4.1.66

I. INTRODUCTION.

In “Equality or Priority?” Derek Parfit draws an important distinction between two categories of distributive principle which tend to favor less advantaged individuals when their interests conflict with those of more advantaged individuals.¹ *Egalitarian principles* do so because they assume that it is intrinsically bad, or unfair, if some individuals are worse off than others. *Prioritarian principles* do not assume that inequality is ever non-instrumentally morally regrettable. Instead they favor the less advantaged because they assume that the moral value of a benefit, or disvalue of a burden, diminishes as its recipient becomes better off. A great deal of recent work on distributive ethics has addressed the relative merits of these two categories of principle. A third category of *sufficiency principles* has also generated some significant debate.²

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¹ See Derek Parfit, “Equality or Priority?,” Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams (eds.), *The Ideal of Equality* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

² The most influential defence of the doctrine of sufficiency is Harry Frankfurt’s “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” *Ethics* 98 (1987): 21-43. See also his “Equality and Respect,” *Social Research* 64 (1997): 3-15, and “The Moral Irrelevance of Equality,”

These principles do not favor the elimination of inequality, nor do they regard benefiting the less well off as generally more important than benefiting the better off. Instead they insist that when evaluating different distributions what matters is whether individuals have enough not to fall below some critical threshold of advantage.

We now have a sophisticated understanding of the principles of equality and priority, but neither our collective understanding of the principle of sufficiency, nor its advocate's statements, are very clear. This paper tries to redress the imbalance, offering a systematic clarification of sufficiency principles' possible contents, and an assessment of the role such principles could play within distributive ethics in supplementing rather than replacing principles of equality and priority.

II. THE STRUCTURE OF SUFFICIENCY: TWO THESES

In an influential passage which inspired negative utilitarians and

Public Affairs Quarterly 14 (2000): 87-103. For the most recent defence, see Roger Crisp, "Equality, Priority, and Compassion," *Ethics* 113 (2003): 745-763, and "Egalitarianism and Compassion," *Ethics* 114 (2004): 119-126, which responds to the criticisms of his earlier paper in Larry Temkin, "Egalitarianism Defended," *Ethics* 113 (2003): 764-82. Other important discussions include: Elizabeth Anderson "What is the Point of Equality?," *Ethics* 109 (1999): 287-337; John Roemer "Eclectic Distributional Ethics," *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* (2004): 267-81; Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), Ch 9; Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); and David Wiggins, "Claims of Need," *Needs, Values, Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 1-58. For the role of sufficiency principles in global justice see: David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 74ff; "Justice and Global Inequality," A. Hurrell and N. Woods (eds.), *Inequality, Globalization and World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); "National Responsibility and International Justice," D. Chatterjee (ed.), *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Debra Satz, "International Economic Justice," H. LaFollete (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Practical Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 620-642. Applying sufficiency across generations, see Wilfred Beckerman and Joanna Pasek, *Justice, Poverty and the Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

from which advocates of sufficiency might draw some support, Karl Popper observes that there is “no symmetry between suffering and happiness, or between pain and pleasure...human suffering makes a direct moral appeal, namely, the appeal for help, while there is no similar call to increase the happiness of a man who is doing well anyway.”³ Popper’s asymmetry can be invoked either to stress the urgency of helping those who suffer, or to deny the importance of benefiting those who do not.⁴ Similarly, the claim that *what matters is whether individuals have enough* might express two different theses. The *Positive Thesis* stresses the importance of people living above a certain threshold, free from deprivation. The *Negative Thesis* denies the relevance of certain additional distributive requirements.

(i) *The Positive Thesis*

Harry Frankfurt states the Positive Thesis thus: “what *is* important from the point of view of morality is not that everyone should have *the same* but that each should have *enough*.”⁵ Instead of pursuing equality, he suggests we employ “available resources in such a way that as many people as possible have enough or, in other words, to *maximise* the incidence of *sufficiency*.”⁶

Frankfurt’s formulation makes the Positive Thesis problematic. So construed, the Thesis favors a world overpopulated with individuals just above sufficiency, and perhaps containing many far below that line, over a less crowded world where

³ *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), 570-71.

⁴ Popper himself supported the latter, claiming that, “[B]oth the greatest happiness principle of the utilitarians and Kant’s principle ‘promote other’s people’s happiness...’ seem to me... fundamentally wrong in this point”. Ibid.

⁵ See “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” 21-22. Though Frankfurt explicitly refers to morality, one reviewer suggests sufficiency might be more plausible as a more discriminating claim about the demands of justice.

⁶ Ibid, 31.

everybody is very well off. To avoid such implications, we might instead require *minimising insufficiency*, but unfortunately the insufficiency-minimising world may be empty. To avoid these problems, we could hold population constant, or focus on the *proportion* of individuals living above and below sufficiency. Even then, however, Frankfurt's statement remains implausible as it requires raising one individual from slightly beneath to slightly above the threshold, even when doing so involves placing an unlimited number of individuals who were previously also just beneath the threshold far below it. Moreover, the statement requires raising a million and one from just below to just above the threshold rather than one million from intense deprivation to paradisiacal conditions.

Further problems beset Roger Crisp's more recent formulation of the Positive Thesis, namely "*absolute* priority is to be given to benefits to those below the threshold".⁷ The sole qualification Crisp adds to his "compassion principle" is that only non-trivial benefits possess such priority: "Below the threshold benefiting people matters more the worse off those people are, the more of those people there are, and the greater the size of the benefit in question. Above the threshold, or in cases concerning only *trivial benefits* below the threshold, no priority is to be given."⁸ According to Crisp's principle, if granting a non-trivial benefit to somebody below the threshold required bringing the rest of humanity down to the compassion threshold, we are required to do so. This requirement is counterintuitive with either a high or a low threshold.

The more moderate thought that it is extremely important to eliminate deprivation is widely accepted, and compatible with a plurality of other principles. In fact, except amongst Hobbesians and libertarians, it is increasingly difficult to find views that do not

⁷ Crisp, "Equality, Priority, and Compassion," 758. Richard Arneson attributes the same principle to David Schmidtz. See Arneson, "Why Justice Requires Transfers to Offset Income and Wealth Inequalities," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 19 (2002): 172-200, 195.

⁸ Crisp, *Ibid.*

accept *some* version of the Positive Thesis, at least as a statement about domestic political morality.⁹ Few deny that the elimination of certain types of deprivation, such as hunger, disease, and ignorance, are very weighty political requirements. Many accept Rawls's view that a just society will guarantee a social minimum, and may even agree that *any* reasonable conception of justice will favor "measures ensuring for all citizens adequate all-purpose means to make effective use of their freedoms."¹⁰

(ii) *The Negative Thesis*

Sufficiency, equality, and priority are not mutually exclusive principles, but might instead be combined in hybrid views. Crisp's hybrid, for example, combines sufficiency with priority by granting lexical importance to benefiting those below rather than above a critical threshold, and then attaching priority to less advantaged individuals in the former category. Other hybrids might affirm a more moderate version of the Positive Thesis, by attaching much greater, though non-lexical, importance to benefiting those with less than enough, or by endorsing prioritarian reasoning above as well as below the threshold.

Despite the possibility of hybrids, the claim that "what matters is whether individuals have enough" is frequently employed not merely to affirm the importance of sufficiency but also to deny the importance of equality and priority. As Frankfurt puts it, "if everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others".¹¹ I shall therefore restrict the label

⁹ Note such acceptance does not depend on the more controversial, and distinctively sufficientarian claim that there are non-instrumentally morally relevant thresholds. Individuals might still converge on the desirability of eliminating deprivation whether or not they affirmed such thresholds.

¹⁰ "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," Samuel Freeman (ed.), *John Rawls: Collected Papers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 582.

¹¹ See "Equality as a Moral Ideal," 21, which also dismisses prioritarian principles at 35-6. See also "Equality and Respect," 3, where Frankfurt "categorically reject[s]" any "egalitarianism, of whatever variety" including "equality of welfare...equality of

‘sufficientarian’ to views that endorse not only some version of the Positive Thesis but also the Negative Thesis’s rejection of egalitarian and prioritarian reasoning at least above some critical threshold. So, what makes a view sufficientarian is not simply the great importance it attaches to eliminating deprivation but the lack of importance it attaches to certain additional distributive requirements.

Clarifying further, we might ask whether sufficientarians extend their critique to distributive principles other than equality and priority, and how they supplement sufficiency when its demands are satisfied by several distributions. Here it is notable that although sufficientarians explicitly reject only equality and priority, they employ arguments that threaten further principles. For example, Frankfurt rejects equality because its pursuit can compete with and frustrate the elimination of deprivation.¹² Yet purely aggregative or desert principles, for example, are far more likely to result in some lacking enough, and thus sufficientarian opposition to them should also be stronger.¹³

Sufficientarians could, however, appeal to aggregation or desert, (or to equality or priority) only when doing so does not jeopardize sufficiency. Nevertheless, neither Frankfurt nor Crisp

opportunity, equal respect, equal rights, equal consideration, equal concern and so on.” Crisp rejects equality at *ibid.*, 748 ff. and priority at *ibid.*, 756 ff.

¹² According to Frankfurt “the error of believing that there are powerful moral reasons to care for equality is far from innocuous. In fact, this belief tends to do significant harm.” See “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” 22.

¹³ In fact, Frankfurt himself later admits that equality and priority might provide “the most feasible approach to the achievement of sufficiency.” See “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” 22. One reason for this concession is that inequality tends to cause insufficiency. See A. Sen, “Poor, Relatively Speaking” in *Resources, Values and Development* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) and *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Ch. 4. See also W. G. Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 1979) and P. Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), esp. 17-18. For discussion of the effects of inequality on ill-health, see, for example, N. Daniels, B. Kennedy and I. Kawachi, “Justice is Good for our Health,” *Boston Review* 25 (2000): 4-19; and R. Wilkinson, *Unhealthy Societies: The Afflictions of Inequality* (London: Routledge, 1996).

explicitly endorses any combination of sufficiency with those principles. Whilst Crisp –like Rawls– notes the possibility of sufficiency-constrained utilitarianism,¹⁴ it is understandable that he refrains from endorsing such a mixed conception, given that once an individual is above the threshold, whether she has more or less is not important. Benefits above the threshold are so unimportant to Crisp that all benefits to individuals above the threshold matter less than just one non-trivial benefit to any individual below it. It would then be puzzling if Crisp endorsed a requirement to maximize benefits that hardly matter.

Regarding desert, neither Frankfurt nor Crisp endorse any such principle,¹⁵ and it seems unlikely we should insist that the deserving receive more benefits than the less deserving, given having more matters so little. Furthermore, Frankfurt is critical of egalitarians for encouraging comparisons, and thus diverting “a person’s attention away from endeavoring to discover...what he himself really cares about”.¹⁶ He also suggests that even academic egalitarians would find it “shabby” and “reprehensible” to care about how they compare with others and “would be appalled if their children grew up with such preoccupations”.¹⁷ It seems far preferable, however, to have children who wonder why others

¹⁴ See Crisp, *ibid*, 758.

¹⁵ Replying to a desert-based objection by Temkin, Crisp claims that if somebody suffers as a consequence of something she did, she deserves less assistance or compassion “or maybe no compassion at all”. (p. 120). However, he later replies to another desert-based objection by Temkin by rejecting desert as “deeply problematic” and resting on “assumptions of free-will which themselves are not securely justified” (p. 125).

¹⁶ In his illuminating reply to Frankfurt, Goodin notes that “if the objection is to your being diverted from what really matters in life, then it should be just as bad (no better, no worse) for you to try to maximize income and wealth as it would be for you to try to equalize them.” See Goodin in “Egalitarianism: Fetishistic or Otherwise,” *Ethics* 98 (1987): 44-49, 45. Note that unlike most of the arguments against sufficientarianism that Goodin and Temkin employ, my later arguments do not rely on welfare egalitarianism. Those arguments can be used by both welfarists and resourcists, though they focus, like Frankfurt’s and Crisp’s, on examples of resource inequality.

¹⁷ “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” 24.

should have so little when they have plenty, than desert-conscious children who think that if others are less virtuous, or productive, then they should fare worse. Since Frankfurt's hostility to *comparative* principles naturally extends to *comparative* desert principles, and the idea of *absolute* desert is so problematic,¹⁸ it seems unlikely he would supplement sufficiency with a desert principle.

While examining how sufficiency principles might be supplemented by additional principles, it is worth noting that in later writings Frankfurt himself endorses a supplementary requirement of *respect* in order to provide a non-egalitarian account of why discrimination is wrong. According to Frankfurt, "treating a person with respect means...dealing with him *exclusively* on the basis of those aspects of his particular character or circumstances that are actually *relevant to the issue at hand*".¹⁹ Explaining how equal treatment differs from respect, he claims that an individual "who insists that he be treated equally is calculating his demands on the basis of what other people have, rather than on the basis of what will accord with the realities of his own conditions and most suitably provide for his own interests and needs."²⁰ To support the respect requirement Frankfurt appeals to the importance of "avoiding the irrationality that would be entailed by relying upon irrelevancies."²¹ However, since he realizes that not every action or attitude unsupported by a relevant reason is prohibited, Frankfurt then adds that "failing to respect somebody is a matter of ignoring the relevance of some aspect of his nature or rationality...pertinent features of how things are with him are treated as though they had no reality".²² Thus, he concludes, the alternative to discrimination "is not equality. It is relevance".²³

¹⁸ See, for example, Miller, "The Concept of Desert," Clayton and Williams (eds.), *Social Justice* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 196-97.

¹⁹ "Equality and Respect," 8, italics added.

²⁰ "Equality and Respect," 13.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 11. See also "The Moral Irrelevance," 102.

²² *Ibid.*, 12. See also "The Moral Irrelevance," 102-3.

²³ "The Moral Irrelevance," 97.

Even if Frankfurt had identified some sound non-egalitarian reasons to oppose discrimination, we should bear in mind that, thereby, he would have rebutted merely one objection to the doctrine of sufficiency. We shall explore some additional objections later but now focus on several reasons to doubt whether Frankfurt's account of discriminatory wrongful discrimination fulfills even this modest objective.

To understand the first reason to doubt the view's adequacy consider an otherwise fair employer who discriminates against the thirteenth applicant for any position, whenever an equally qualified rival is available. Compare this case with the more familiar example of racially prejudiced employers. One might agree that the superstitious employer has deeply mistaken beliefs about his reasons for action but still question whether being guided by an irrelevant consideration (like an aversion to the number thirteen) is sufficient for acting wrongly or meriting prosecution. By contrast, the racist employer elicits firm and widespread condemnation. An adequate account of discrimination should be able to detect a moral difference between the practice of the superstitious and the racist employers and explain why the second is far more objectionable than the first. An egalitarian account can do so, for example, by appealing to the fact that, unlike the racist, the superstitious employer will not knowingly and systematically disadvantage any social group, because numerical discrimination has no tendency to disadvantage any particular individuals since each is equally likely to submit the thirteenth application.²⁴ In contrast, Frankfurt's view faces a more serious challenge to justify our differential response to the two cases.

To understand the second problem with the view, note that only some cases of discrimination involve prejudice against features, such as skin color or application number, which can be straightforwardly described as "irrelevant" because so unlikely to impair a candidate's performance or hinder the success of an

²⁴ For an account of discrimination focused on how it systematically disadvantages particular groups, see Catherine McKinnon, *The Sexual Harassment of Working Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 116.

enterprise. In other cases discrimination targets features that are certain to impair performance or hinder an enterprise, such as becoming pregnant or taking maternity leave. Various egalitarian arguments are available to condemn discrimination even in the absence of prejudice. For example, egalitarians can argue that women having to bear a larger share of the burden of reproduction than men, and being less likely to have partners devoted to supporting their careers, produces inequalities in occupational opportunity that society should try to redress rather than exacerbate by allowing discrimination. By contrast, Frankfurt's appeal to relevance seems tailored for cases involving prejudice, and unlikely to deal adequately with those where it is absent.

To understand a final reason to doubt that the appeal to respect renders egalitarian opposition to discrimination dispensable consider the extent to which public like private decision-making is rationally underdetermined.²⁵ There is often no uniquely reasonable answer to questions about the age at which individuals should acquire certain rights and duties, or the appropriate punishment for certain offences. Instead, there is a range of acceptable answers, the contours of which depend partly on comparative considerations. It seems implausible to suggest that we merely need to observe somebody's "nature and rationality" to decide what rights, duties, penalties or wages this person should have, irrespective of what has been established for others. Frankfurt's insistence that we disregard comparative considerations leaves him unable to explain the plausible preference for rules, which are to some extent *arbitrary but equal* over those that are *both arbitrary and unequal*. Frankfurt's prohibition would also make it extremely difficult for individuals or third parties to recognize whether, and to what extent, they have been discriminated against, and fight successfully against discriminatory action.

Having stated some challenges for the account of discrimination suggested by Frankfurt's supplementary requirement of respect, I now turn to a final issue neglected in discussions of

²⁵ For relevant discussion, see the remarks about the classical conception of human agency in Raz, *Engaging Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 66ff.

sufficiency, namely the relation between the Positive and Negative Theses.

(iii) *The Dominant Thesis?*

Though Frankfurt and Crisp devote more attention to refuting equality than defending a requirement to eliminate deprivation, they say little about which concern drives their view. For example, a sufficientarian could care mainly about the Positive Thesis, and be moved by the fact that most human beings live hard, pain-ridden lives, and die prematurely from easily preventable causes. She could argue that since no other distributive fact has comparable importance, we should focus on benefiting the global poor and ignore the fact that other people might be even more fortunate than us. On this view, we should ignore inequality because any gap existing amongst most inhabitants of the developed world pales in significance by comparison with the gap between those who have enough and those who lack enough. Thus, any complaint of unfairness we may have towards privileged co-nationals is insignificant compared to our duty towards the global poor.

By contrast, a sufficientarian may be moved primarily by the Negative Thesis, and the desire to discredit any egalitarian or prioritarian impulse that could hinder a political agenda of accumulation, and low taxation for the very rich. If so, the Positive Thesis would have only the subsidiary role of taking the edge off egalitarianism, by eliminating the more forceful examples used to support it.

Having noted some of the ways in which the doctrine of sufficiency is still under-theorized, I shall now begin my attempt to correct this deficiency. Initially restricting my remarks to explicit sufficientarian claims, I shall first discuss whether four core sufficientarian arguments justify not only the Positive Thesis that sufficiency matters but also the Negative Thesis that equality and priority do not. If the latter Thesis is unsupported, as I suggest in section III, and anti-egalitarian sufficiency proves implausible, as I claim in section IV, pluralist versions of the doctrine of sufficiency

may still be worth considering. I therefore turn to this more constructive task in sections V and VI.

III. GROUNDS FOR SUFFICIENCY: FOUR ARGUMENTS

(i) *The Deprivation Argument*

Consider first what I shall term the *Deprivation Argument*. Sufficientarians often speculate that what really disturbs self-declared egalitarians (or prioritarrians) is not the fact that some people have *less* than others but rather that they have *too little*.²⁶ It is bad when people lack enough food, clothing, or shelter and the fact some have more than others may be evidence that deprivation is remediable, but does not show that we should try to reduce inequality, or attach priority to the worse off. Fixating on such goals is, at best, a distraction since it obscures what really matters, namely ensuring each individual has enough.²⁷

The Deprivation Argument is a useful reminder of the *non-comparative* importance of deprivation, which egalitarians, unlike prioritarrians, do not always bear in mind. However, the claim that all egalitarians, including some of the most sophisticated philosophers, believe that equality matters only because they confuse “being poorer than others” and “being poor” is rather implausible. Moreover, since there are, as I hope to show, defenses of equality that do not depend on the presence of poverty, the Deprivation Argument fails to establish the Negative Thesis.

²⁶ Frankfurt, *ibid.* 32-3. As “a typical example of this confusion,” Frankfurt cites Ronald Dworkin’s remark that it is “apparent that the United States falls far short now [of the egalitarian ideal]. A substantial minority of Americans are chronically unemployed or earn wages below any realistic ‘poverty line’ or are handicapped in various ways or burdened with special needs; and most of these people would do the work necessary to earn a decent living if they had the opportunity and capacity” in *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 208. However, here Dworkin is only noting that the United States is a very unequal society. He grounds his egalitarian theory elsewhere.

²⁷ Or, as Raz puts it, “the hunger of the hungry, the need of the needy, the suffering of the ill...” See *The Morality of Freedom*, 240.

(ii) *The Allegiance Argument*

Seeking an alternative justification of their position, sufficientarians might turn to the liberal idea that political order should be maintained by a reflective normative consensus rather than some combination of brute force, manipulation, and delusion. Advancing what I term the *Allegiance Argument*, they could defend sufficiency principles by claiming there are weighty reasons to minimize reliance on distributive principles that impose burdens upon individuals they are incapable of bearing voluntarily. John Rawls, for example, has invoked this claim to criticize purely aggregative principles that place no limits on the sacrifices they demand of individuals, and so generate unacceptable “strains of commitment.”²⁸ Inspired by Rawls, Jeremy Waldron has explicitly defended the provision of a social minimum by appeal to similar considerations.²⁹ Do such considerations support sufficientarianism?

It is plausible to claim that it is desirable for political principles to generate their own support and that securing sufficiency will enhance their capacity to do so. So, the Allegiance Argument provides some support for the Positive Thesis. However, the fact that principles securing sufficiency are more likely to generate their own support than ones failing to do so does not establish that principles that reduce inequality as well as secure sufficiency are less likely to foster allegiance than ones which merely secure sufficiency. The Argument therefore leaves the Negative Thesis unsupported. Moreover, sufficientarians’ disregard for inequality leaves them with little to say to the relatively disadvantaged, and so may even threaten allegiance. When a disadvantaged minority complains about inequality, the sufficientarian merely replies, “Yes, we could adopt policies which,

²⁸ See *A Theory of Justice*, 153-54, and cp. 126 and 370ff. For discussion of Rawls’s appeal to “the strains of commitment”, see also Thomas Scanlon, “Contractualism and Utilitarianism,” A. Sen and B. Williams (eds.), *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 125ff.

²⁹ See “John Rawls and the Social Minimum,” *Liberal Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For Rawls’s response, see *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 127-29.

besides satisfying sufficiency, also reduce those inequalities, but we regard those inequalities as irrelevant.” Such dismissal is unlikely to win the allegiance of the worse off, particularly if the critical threshold is low.

Having argued that the Allegiance Argument at most supports the Positive Thesis, we now turn to two further sufficientarian arguments that are more promising because they bear more directly upon the Negative Thesis.

(iii) *The Scarcity Argument*

The *Scarcity Argument* focuses on cases where it is possible to ensure that some but not all individuals reach a critical threshold. Employing such an argument, a sufficientarian might insist that if there is enough medicine to save only five out of ten patients, we should not distribute medicine equally, or give priority to the least advantaged, if doing so results in any unnecessary deaths. For example, Frankfurt appeals to a case in which “an egalitarian distribution may lead to disaster” and concludes “it is a mistake to maintain that *where some people have less than enough, no one should have more than anyone else.*”³⁰ He adds that it may sometimes be better to deny a resource to the least advantaged because the benefit it produces “may still be too small to serve any useful purpose,” and instead give the resource to someone on whom it will have a more beneficial effect.³¹ Frankfurt also concludes such cases show it is mistaken to assume that “*where some people have less than enough, nobody should have more than enough.*”³²

Before assessing these conclusions, note that sufficientarians can appeal to scenarios of extreme scarcity in order to support two

³⁰ “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” 31.

³¹ Note that at least prioritarians who do not give absolute priority to the worst off are perfectly invulnerable to this criticism because they take the size of the benefits into account.

³² *Ibid.*

distinct charges, namely that egalitarian principles are unsound because they may favor preventing some individuals from having enough (a) merely to ensure that *all* enjoy an equal distribution of insufficient benefits or (b) even when doing so is not to *any* individual's advantage. In other words, pursuing equality may be objectionable because it leads to insufficiency or to (Pareto) inefficiency. I shall now discuss both charges under separate sub-headings.

(a) *Equality and Insufficiency*

Suppose enough medicine exists to ensure either that five patients survive and five patients die painfully or that ten die painlessly. Proponents of the Scarcity Argument who press charge (a) claim that egalitarian principles are implausible because they favor the latter option. How might egalitarians respond?

One simple response is that such examples do not establish the Negative Thesis, but only the Positive Thesis that sufficiency matters: we should give individuals a sufficient dose of medicine for them to survive. The Scarcity Argument, therefore, gives us no reason to assume that, once everyone's life is saved, it is a matter of indifference how to distribute benefits in excess of those required to attain sufficiency. To see why the distribution of such benefits might matter, 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. The Scarcity Argument, however, does nothing to prove otherwise. Thus, it fails to establish that *when everyone has enough it does not matter how unequally additional resources are distributed*.

The Argument also fails to establish that *when not everyone can have enough, egalitarian considerations have no relevance*.³³

³³ Note that this objection does not apply to Crisp, who affirms prioritarianism below

Two types of case illustrate this further failure. To understand the former, suppose that the medicine to be distributed does not prevent death but merely makes death less painful. It would be unfair if all the pain-relieving medicine was distributed to the fortunate few. The fact that such medicine cannot secure sufficiency does not make its distribution morally unimportant.

The second type of case is illustrated by Frankfurt's own example, in which there is enough medicine to save only five of ten patients. Sufficientarians overlook this possibility because they unreasonably assume that in such a case egalitarian reasoning favours the death of all ten patients. It does not, just like believing in public access to high art does not commit us to wanting to give everyone a shred of the Mona Lisa. Under any reasonable reading, egalitarians are committed to *distributing* rather than to *destroying* benefits and to doing so in a manner that satisfies *each individual's equal claim to be benefited*: that is, by giving everybody an equal chance to survive (or, if one prefers, an equal opportunity for sufficiency). Unlike the sufficientarian, the egalitarian doctor is required to employ a fair selection of the lucky five. So, for example, equality requires taking the patients' age into consideration because those who are younger have enjoyed less of the good under distribution (life-years) and therefore have stronger claims to the good than others. Thus, although minimizing insufficiency is important, equality also matters. Indeed, it is precisely because it is so valuable to secure sufficiency that we have a weighty reason to ensure each individual has an equal chance of enjoying the life-saving medicine.

To summarise then, the Scarcity Argument rests on the plausible thought that sometimes there are weighty *instrumental* reasons to ensure each individual has enough but leaves quite untouched any reasonable version of egalitarianism. In particular, it fails to undermine the core egalitarian convictions that (i) even if universal sufficiency is attained, equality still matters, and when universal sufficiency cannot be attained, equality may still matter in

the threshold.

the distribution of either (ii) non-critical benefits or (iii) the opportunity to enjoy critical benefits.

(b) *Equality and Inefficiency*

A more sophisticated argument, known as the Levelling Down Objection, claims that egalitarian principles are implausible because they condemn inequality even when it is beneficial to some and detrimental to nobody.³⁴ Such an objection is particularly forceful in scarcity scenarios. In the above case, for example, the egalitarian doctor who cannot save all her patients is not committed to letting them all die. But many assume she is committed to believing that it would be *in one way* good if they all died since then there would be no inequality. In such scenarios egalitarianism seems not merely inefficient, or wasteful, but perverse. This is a powerful charge, but it does not support the Negative Thesis because prioritarians are perfectly immune to it. Moreover, as I shall now show, egalitarians have a wide range of responses to it.

The first *Pluralist Egalitarian* response distinguishes between *decisive* and *pro-tanto* reasons to equalise, and argues that our reluctance to level down shows only that equality is not always a decisive consideration. Not everyone, however, will be convinced that more equality is always in one respect better than less. Some may prefer a *Conditional Egalitarian* response that affirms a reason to pursue equality, but only provided that doing so does not jeopardise either sufficiency or efficiency. We return to Pluralist Egalitarianism in section V, when I discuss *Sufficiency-Constrained Egalitarianism*. For now, it suffices to mention that the most familiar version of Conditional Egalitarianism is the *Paretian Egalitarian Argument* that justice requires the most equal efficient distribution.³⁵ Rawls employs this argument to provide intuitive

³⁴ For discussion, see Parfit, “Equality or Priority?,” and Temkin, “Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection,” Clayton and Williams (eds.), *The Ideal of Equality*.

³⁵ For a defence of the pluralist view, see Temkin, *Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford

support for his difference principle, according to which expansions in inequality are just providing that they are not detrimental to the less advantaged. As Rawls explained, his view denies that justice requires equality not only when equality deprives the least advantaged of enough, but when it leaves them worse off than they need to be (or would be if there was more inequality).³⁶

There is also a third, less familiar, form of conditional egalitarianism, which I term *Levelling-Up Egalitarianism*. It can be illustrated with the following set of attitudes. Suppose that, at a charity meeting, we hesitate between benefiting a group of poor individuals and preserving something of impersonal value, such as a work of art or a threatened habitat. We then learn that, because of the existence of a group of better off individuals, choosing the first project will not only benefit badly off people but also eliminate an inequality. Our doubts about the balance of reasons disappear, and we decide to support the former project. Suppose we later discover the existence of a third group of individuals who are as poor as those we previously chose to benefit. Thus, whilst our earlier decision eliminated one inequality it produced another just as large. However, we do not choose to reverse our decision since we are convinced that reducing inequality has value only if it benefits individuals.

Finally, a set of hybrid principles that combines egalitarian and prioritarian elements provides another type of reply to the Objection. To understand this class of what we may term *Prigalitarian* views, recall that the standard version of prioritarianism is non-comparative. It claims that the moral value of benefiting an individual diminishes as she becomes better off on an absolute scale. It disregards how the individual is located on some

University Press, 1993), Ch. 9 and “Equality, Priority, and the Levelling Down Objection”, Clayton and Williams, *ibid.*, 126-162. See also fn. 4 on conditional egalitarianism. For Paretian egalitarianism, see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 53ff and 153ff. and Williams, “The Revisionist Difference Principle,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 25 (1995):257-81.

³⁶ See *A Theory of Justice*, 58ff. Note that many of the problems Frankfurt invokes were already addressed by Rawls two decades earlier.

relative scale, involving comparison with others. In contrast, *Comparative Prioritarianism* attaches priority to benefiting individuals who are less advantaged than others in a relative rather than an absolute sense.³⁷ More plausibly, *Mixed Prioritarianism* attaches priority to those who are less advantaged on both a relative and an absolute scale. Equality and priority can also be combined in other ways. For example, in addition to giving priority to the less advantaged, we may be particularly concerned with those who have less than an equal share of benefits. We may simply be slightly more concerned with them, or we may give lexical priority to any individual below the mean.³⁸ These efficiency-friendly forms of egalitarian reasoning provide further possibilities to resist sufficientarianism in the face of the Levelling Down Objection.

I conclude then that Scarcity Arguments fail to demonstrate that principles of equality and priority have no place in distributive ethics.

(iv) *The Abundance Argument*

Abundance Arguments appeal to cases involving extreme affluence rather than extreme scarcity. Their proponents argue, for example, that it would be absurd to be concerned whether one person drives a Rolls Royce when another can afford only a Daimler. Relying on Frankfurt's observation that it is "possible for those who are worse off not to have more urgent needs or claims than those who are better off, because it is possible for them to have no urgent needs at all" they might also deny we should attach any priority to benefiting millionaires before billionaires.³⁹

³⁷ See, for example, Ingmar Persson, "Equality, Priority, and Person-Affecting Value," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 4, (2001): 23-29, 35, and Iwao Hirose, doctoral thesis, *Equality, Priority and Numbers*, Department of Moral Philosophy, University of St. Andrews (2003).

³⁸ For excellent defence of this view, see Peter Vallentyne, "Equality, Efficiency and the Priority of the Worse Off," *Economics and Philosophy* 16 (2000): 1-19.

³⁹ Frankfurt, *ibid.*, 35-36.

Critics of such arguments might reply that situations of extreme scarcity or abundance are outside what Rawls, following Hume, termed “the circumstances of justice.”⁴⁰ It is arguable that standard principles of distributive justice do not apply, or apply differently, in lifeboat situations where not everybody can survive, and cornucopian situations where Marxists imagined all social conflicts cease. For example, we may believe that once an individual has reached a certain level of advantage, extra funds cannot improve his life; or we may believe that, even though extra funds could still make a difference, inequalities among such fortunate individuals do not matter, or matter too little to constitute an injustice. In either case, conceding that neither egalitarian nor prioritarian principles are applicable in extreme circumstances does not show that they are also irrelevant in more familiar circumstances. Some critics might find this response unappealing because, like sufficiency principles, it relies on thresholds to distinguish different situations. One reply to this worry is to note we may have a conception of normality that does not rely on any specific threshold to demarcate normal from abnormal cases.

Other critics might attempt to provide an egalitarian or prioritarian *explanation* of the Rolls-Daimler intuition. They might grant that the elimination of inequality becomes less valuable as the individuals concerned become better off but deny that once sufficiency is satisfied the elimination of inequality lacks any value. Given that the disvalue of inequality, or the value of benefiting someone, diminishes the better off she becomes and the smaller the good at stake, distributing small sums among millionaires is unlikely to be important. The alleged counterexample is, thus, a corollary of the principles it purports to refute.⁴¹

⁴⁰ See *A Theory of Justice*, sec. 22.

⁴¹ Egalitarians can accommodate the intuition in other ways. Temkin, for example, suggests that benefiting either millionaires or multimillionaires is comparably deleterious on many plausible measures of inequality, including deviation from the mean, or the gap between the least advantaged – or all those below the average – and the average. See “Egalitarianism Defended,” 770. The same goes for other measures, such as the distance between the poorest half and the average, the best off group and the worst off group, and so on.

Finally, the critics could challenge the Rolls-Daimler intuition, and insist that inequalities matter even among very wealthy individuals. They might argue, for example, that when a natural disaster like a tsunami strikes, it is the wealthiest who should make the greatest donation. Sufficiencyarians cannot accommodate such plausible convictions. Moreover, since sufficiencyarians are indifferent not only to inequalities among millionaires and billionaires but also to inequalities among billionaires and those who have barely enough, they cannot support the preference for progressive over regressive taxes when both are capable of securing sufficiency. This indifference towards finding the fairest way of achieving universal sufficiency is counterintuitive. Both Shakespeare's couplet and Marx's dictum "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" stress not only the value of achieving sufficiency but also the importance of doing so by taking more from those who have most. Sufficiencyarians, by contrast, focus exclusively on whether each man has enough, and so ignore whether the resulting distribution undoes, or exacerbates, excess.

The sufficiencyarian claim that inequalities among individuals who have enough are irrelevant also makes the view unappealing to all those who have convictions about the importance of what Rawls terms *fair equality of opportunity*.⁴² Even when everyone has enough, it still seems deeply unfair that merely in virtue of being born into a wealthy family some should have at their disposal all sorts of advantages, contacts, and opportunities, while others inherit little more than a name.

Before concluding my discussion of the Abundance Argument, we should consider Crisp's recent *Beverly Hill Case*, concerning the distribution of fine wine amongst two groups of *Rich* and *Super-Rich* individuals, all of whom are extremely well off in all respects. Crisp stipulates that providing ten of the *Rich* with some *Lafite 1882*, thereby moving them from welfare level 80 to 82 has a moral value of 390, whilst the value of providing a different

⁴² See *A Theory of Justice*, 265.

amount of *Latour 1882* to ten thousand *Super-Rich*, who then move from 90 to 92, is just below 390. He then insists that it is “somewhat absurd to think that the *Rich* should be given priority over the *Super-Rich*,” and suggests that there is “nothing to be said for giving priority to the “worse off”.’⁴³

Crisp’s case is vulnerable to the arguments advanced so far, as well as problematic in its own right. First, as noted initially, Crisp’s statement and defense of his version of the Positive Thesis explicitly excludes *trivial benefits* since they evoke different intuitions to significant benefits, and make his own view appear implausible. However, in order to make egalitarianism appear implausible, Crisp selects what is clearly a trivial benefit: some increase in the quantity of wine available to people who already have access to as much fine wine as they can drink.⁴⁴ Second, the case is misleading, because it suggests an extremely high threshold, which is attained by very few, and far exceeds the level at which individuals are so “badly off” that “compassion” sets in. If universal sufficiency really rendered priority inapplicable, Crisp would have been able to appeal, *with identical results*, to an example involving a conflict between one of the Super-Rich and someone just above the “compassion” threshold over the distribution of *life-changing benefits*, such as those at stake in the egalitarian defense of progressive taxation or fair equality of opportunity. But then, of course, as he must have suspected, such an example would not have elicited the necessary anti-egalitarian intuition.

⁴³ Crisp, 755. One Editor suggested modifying Crisp’s example by replacing Lafite 1882 by Lafite 1899, given that, as Michael Broadbent explains in *Vintage Wine* (Time Warner, 2002), whilst the former is “poor” and “dreary”, the latter is “lovely, gentle, cedary, and elegant”. But then, perhaps, the balance would too clearly swing in favour of granting the less wealthy drinkers such a treat!

⁴⁴ Crisp’s claim at fn. 24, that replacing the wine by any non-trivial benefit makes no difference, overlooks the fact that the importance of inequality depends on the importance of the good being distributed. Thus, most care little about unequal access to additional wine, but care very much about unequal access to good hospitals and universities. For a discussion of the puzzling or intransitive results produced by examples involving either trivial or small benefits, see Temkin, “A New Principle of Aggregation,” *Philosophical Issues* 15 (2005), 219-234.

IV. PROBLEMS WITH SUFFICIENCY: FOUR DILEMMAS.

So far I have argued that one can retain the Positive Thesis whilst rejecting the Negative Thesis, and that four familiar sufficientarian arguments fail to establish the latter Thesis. I shall now discuss some additional problems with sufficientarianism that arise when sufficientarians are asked to clarify their view.

(i) *The Choice between Ambiguous and Arbitrary Thresholds.*

Given the importance sufficientarians attach to individuals having “enough”, perhaps the most pressing problem they face is to specify that idea in a principled manner that provides determinate and plausible guidance for distributive decision-makers.⁴⁵ Certain natural thresholds, like the point where starvation causes death or irreversible damage, appear to meet these desiderata. However, given their reliance on a conception of adequate longevity or functioning, natural thresholds still lie on a continuum of eligible alternatives. Moreover, the insensitivity to local conditions that makes them appear so natural also renders them too minimal to count as plausible sufficiency thresholds in developed societies.

Frankfurt’s own specification of sufficiency, though it eschews natural thresholds, is too ambiguous to be satisfactory. For Frankfurt employs at least three different criteria, wrongly assuming they all define the same threshold.⁴⁶ In addition, his remarks about

⁴⁵ For discussion of the difficulties involved in specifying a social minimum, see Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 277ff. For criticism of other attempts to specify sufficiency by Martha Nussbaum, Arthur Ripstein and Michael Walzer, see Arneson, *ibid.* 191.

⁴⁶ In “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” 37ff, Frankfurt claims that a satisfied person (i) lacks “an active interest in getting more,” (ii) “regards having more money as inessential to his being satisfied with his life,” and (iii) “is satisfied with the amount of satisfaction he already has.” However, I may not actively be trying to improve my lot because I think my chances of so doing are too slim, but still believe that certain improvements are essential to my being satisfied with my life; or, I may consider more money inessential to my being satisfied with my life whilst still be dissatisfied with my degree of satisfaction.

some of those criteria can be interpreted in very different ways. For example, his claim that somebody has enough when he lacks “an active interest in getting more” suggests to me a very high threshold. (I doubt having met a person satisfied in this sense.) To others, like Goodin, it suggests one unacceptably low: “The ignorant worker who has not realized that they are paying higher wages up North is deemed satisfied with his sharecropping arrangement and the debt peonage that it entails”.⁴⁷ Finally, Frankfurt fails to address the standard objections to the subjective aspect of his various criteria.⁴⁸

Crisp tries to escape ambiguity but succumbs to arbitrariness with an astonishing remark. Thus, Crisp claims even if the universe contained trillions of beings with far superior lives to even the most fortunate humans, the compassion threshold would still lie at exactly the same level: “eighty years of high-quality life”. Apparently this much is “*more* than enough for *any being*”, so seventy-something should suffice.⁴⁹ According to Crisp, then, all of humanity could be allowed to die at seventy-something for the sake of any non-trivial benefit to somebody just below the threshold. In fact, even if trillions of beings entered adolescence only at seventy, Crisp’s seventy-something rule implies that they may be sacrificed before adulthood to benefit not only human sexagenarians but also far more short-lived animals, which merit, on his view, the greatest priority.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Goodin, *ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁸ For example, such criteria pander to individuals with relatively expensive preferences, more materialist outlooks, or demanding personalities. For related problems with subjective criteria see Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 11-65, and 285-303.

⁴⁹ Frankfurt, *ibid.*, 762, italics added.

⁵⁰ Thus, on p. 760, Crisp writes “Any plausible absolute threshold is likely to require us to give priority to small, though non-trivial, increases in the welfare of any number of perfectly contented non-human animals over large increases in the welfare of any number of human beings...The compassion principle requires us to give better quality biscuits to [a contented] dog over his lifetime in preference to relieving the pain of many human beings (again, perhaps over their lifetimes).

(ii) *The Choice between Possible Units of Concern*

Sufficientarians also need to clarify how their view deals with episodes of deprivation within lives. One possibility requires minimizing the number of such episodes, but this is not a plausible principle to rule a society or to conduct our own lives.⁵¹ Confronted with this issue, the obvious alternative is to claim that what matters is that people have lives which are sufficiently good considered as a whole even if they involve periods of deprivation. Such a solution, however, generates problems of its own. First, it is unclear whether sufficientarians could still employ the Allegiance Argument. And, second, given that sufficientarians attach such moral urgency to eliminating insufficiency and so little importance to having more than enough, it is difficult to see what could compensate for a period of great suffering so that a life which contains it can still be sufficiently good.

There are further reasons to think sufficientarianism, despite its concern with absolute deprivation, may fail to capture the normative significance of episodes of deprivation. To understand why consider how equality or priority explain the relative urgency of ending different episodes of deprivation which do not impact on the incidence of lifetime insufficiency,

Suppose three individuals need an operation to end some episode of serious deprivation from which they currently suffer. We discover that the first, Ana, has already suffered so much that, despite the operation, she cannot secure a sufficiently good life. Since Ana's fate is sealed, a principle requiring the minimization of insufficiency does not provide any reason to operate. So, Ana's case shows why sufficientarians should, as Crisp recognizes, incorporate prioritarian considerations within their overall view in order to maintain their plausibility.

⁵¹ It would also be less plausible than negative utilitarianism, which requires minimizing the total sum of suffering in the world, and so takes degrees of suffering into account. See Jamie Mayerfeld, *Suffering and Moral Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Ch. 9. See also James Griffin, "Is Unhappiness Morally More Important Than Happiness?," *Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (1979): 47-59.

Now consider Bea and Celia who, despite their present suffering, both have enjoyed sufficiently good lives, though Bea's life has been barely good enough, whilst Celia's has always been extremely good in all respects. This case raises two further problems. First, given that both Bea and Celia have enough, it is unclear how sufficientarians can account for our reasons to operate on them. So, assuming Bea's and Celia's deprivation is a reason to operate, the case shows their view remains incomplete even when it incorporates prioritarianism below the threshold. The second problem arises because a sufficiency view's negative thesis implies that the fact Bea is far worse off than Celia's does not provide any reason to end her episodic deprivation in preference to Celia's.⁵² This implication is surely implausible – even if we accept that the inequality between Bea and Celia makes no difference when allocating luxuries, and that it should not guide certain agents, like those directly responsible for their medical care. Giving priority to Bea, however, amounts to admitting that there are relevant inequalities between people who had barely enough and those who had plenty – even if this admission is then explained by the fact that those who have plenty can withstand greater losses before they fall below (or approach, or risk approaching) the threshold. Moreover, the suggestion cannot explain all the relevant cases. We may give priority to Bea, even if their chances of lacking enough without the operation were the same, because Bea suffered much more during her life while Celia had the world at her feet.

(iii) *The Choice between High and Low Thresholds*

Further problems in specifying sufficiency concern the choice between higher and lower thresholds. One problem arises because lower thresholds make it more plausible to insist, as the Positive

⁵² Crisp claims that episodic insufficiency sometimes requires the continued provision of benefits to somebody who has already had plenty from a complete life perspective, but fails to provide either any principled justification for this conviction nor an explanation of whether individuals with lives just above sufficiency are entitled to the same quantity of additional benefits as those far above. See "Equality, Priority and Compassion," 762.

Thesis does, that everyone must have enough, but less plausible to endorse the Negative Thesis's dismissal of egalitarian and prioritarian considerations when resolving distributive conflicts between those who have plenty and those who have barely enough. Another problem arises because *low sufficientarian* and *high sufficientarian* policies both may have difficulties gaining individuals' allegiance. The first may do so by taking too little to be enough to secure allegiance; the second may also do so because of its willingness to sacrifice the less advantaged individuals to ensure as many as possible have enough, in a high sufficientarian sense. The suspicion arises, then, that sufficientarianism maintains its plausibility by remaining vague about the critical threshold, and that once we ask whether the threshold is high or low its plausibility plummets. For example, employing a *high* threshold increases the Abundance Argument's plausibility but decreases that of the Deprivation and Scarcity Arguments. As soon as we change the thresholds, the examples make less sense.

As illustration, consider Frankfurt's case of the ten patients only five of which can be saved. Frankfurt claims that sufficientarians would save the five patients because they believe in ensuring "that as many people as possible have enough."⁵³ If "enough" means "enough to survive" such a rule requires saving five lives. However, the requirement to maximize the number of people who have enough might instead require investing all the resources available in just one individual, so that she reaches a threshold well above survival, or even becomes "satisfied" in Frankfurt's sense, thereby allowing nine deaths.

The case also illustrates Frankfurt's problems regarding allegiance: the nine abandoned patients would have a very strong complaint, particularly since none of them would have been given an equal chance to be the lucky winner. Nor can high sufficientarians derive much support from the Deprivation Argument, which emphasizes the badness of hunger, homelessness and other forms of deprivation. The badness of deprivation cannot

⁵³ "Equality as a Moral Ideal," 31.

justify aiming for a threshold that is well above it. Moreover, employing a high threshold may in fact detract from the goal of eliminating deprivation: as in the medical example, nine would be deprived of life so that one can be satisfied in a high sufficientarian sense.⁵⁴

It is therefore unsurprising that sufficientarians should find great difficulty in defining a threshold. Conversely, it is surprising that they attach such importance to a threshold when they are so uncertain about its location. The sufficientarians' indifference to what happens to those who are sure to remain above, and perhaps even below, their mysterious line contrasts rather unappealingly with their single-minded obsession with crossing the threshold. How could it be so important for individuals to reach such a threshold as to warrant enormous opportunity costs for others yet unimportant how far above the line they are when deciding how much to benefit them further? A threshold cannot be so low and so high at the same time. In sum, it seems unlikely that a single threshold, high or low, could lend plausibility to *all* the sufficientarians' claims.

(iv) *The Choice between Single and Multiple Thresholds*

Though Frankfurt and Crisp apparently assume both the Positive and the Negative Thesis involve the same threshold, one solution to the previous problem is to employ a plurality of thresholds. To understand the appeal of multi-level sufficientarianism, recall Crisp claims that there exists a threshold such that individuals below have absolute priority over those above, and a threshold beneath which prioritarianism applies. Though he offers no justification, Crisp assumes both thresholds coincide. In contrast, the multi-level view grants absolute priority to individuals below a low threshold, and then grants them some priority until they exceed a higher threshold. Doing so is more plausible partly because it is strange to think that individuals can suddenly plummet from having *absolute priority* to

⁵⁴ Note that Crisp's restricted prioritarianism avoids this implication, as would a view which simply gave considerable but not absolute priority to those who lack enough.

no priority whatsoever. Moreover, maintaining prioritarianism above the first sufficiency threshold also ensures individuals with barely enough still have some priority over others with plenty without relying on any completely general prioritarianism.

A recent discussion of sufficientarianism employs several thresholds.⁵⁵ Doing so creates the need to decide how many individuals should be allowed to fall below a lower threshold to ensure a larger number do not fall below a higher threshold. Granting lexical priority to minimizing shortfalls at lower thresholds avoids this problem, but only at the expense of plausibility. It seems less arbitrary to weigh gains and losses at various thresholds more flexibly, as prioritarians do. Also since benefits do not come in only two sizes – trivial or non-trivial – it would be more plausible to consider the *size* of the gains and losses. Though such sensible amendments invariably lead us closer to prioritarianism, some may resist abandoning thresholds altogether because they think that benefits to people below certain thresholds are particularly important. For example, certain levels of nutrition, literacy, and numeracy appear to constitute important thresholds. Though these are sound considerations, they do not count against prioritarianism since, as indicated, the prioritarian is committed to taking the *size* of benefits into account. Therefore, whenever benefits to individuals below a certain threshold are particularly substantial, prioritarians will already attach urgency to securing those crucial benefits. What prioritarians reject is focusing on thresholds for which there is no instrumental justification.

(v) *The Choice between Sufficiency and Priority*

The foregoing considerations cast serious doubt on the need to reject prioritarianism in favor of the more complicated and problematic sufficientarian alternative. It is also worth noting that even some of

⁵⁵ See Francisco Sales-Heredia, *Distributive Criteria in the Design of Poverty Alleviation Programs: Mexico 1992-2000*, doctoral thesis, University of Warwick (2003).

sufficiency's advocates might concede that, at least in our world, a priority view provides adequate guidance. For note Crisp already admits prioritarianism below the threshold and, like Frankfurt, suggests a threshold that is so high that virtually all of humanity lives below it, and therefore within prioritarian territory. Even pockets of affluence like Beverly Hills may not lie entirely beyond the reach of prioritarianism, because they are the pockets that must provide what the less fortunate need.

Furthermore, when responding to Temkin, Crisp emphasizes the dissimilarity between our world and the imaginary world of his Beverly Hills case, which exists on an isolated planet where every being enjoys an extremely high level of advantage.⁵⁶ Crisp claims, for example, that Temkin's egalitarian criticisms miss the mark because his Beverly Hills is not on a planet where almost half of humanity live on less than two dollars per day. Such disclaimers, however, cast doubt on the relevance of Crisp's critique of prioritarianism to the real world. Perhaps his version of the Negative Thesis was meant to be only of theoretical importance rather than a rejection of prioritarian policies on planet Earth. Nevertheless, it remains possible that even less anti-egalitarian versions of sufficiency could play some role in terrestrial ethics, rather than in some fictitious planet Hollywood, and the next section examines this possibility.

V. THE PLACE OF SUFFICIENCY: THREE HYBRIDS

So far I have considered the doctrine of sufficiency as comprising a Positive Thesis stressing the importance of sufficiency and a Negative Thesis rejecting equality and priority. I have suggested less extreme versions of the Positive Thesis that replace any absolute requirement to maximize sufficiency, or minimize insufficiency, with the claim that sufficiency matters greatly. I now propose revising the Negative Thesis, so that it merely denies that equality and priority should stand unaccompanied by sufficiency. To do so, I

⁵⁶ "Egalitarianism and Compassion," 121ff.

present three problems for egalitarians and discuss how sufficiency might *supplement* rather than *replace* equality and priority.⁵⁷

(i) *Addressing Universal Blindness*

Consider first the Levelling Down Objection discussed earlier. Even those who have little antipathy to wasting benefits for individuals who are extremely well off, in both absolute and relative terms, often reject the unrestricted egalitarian view that it would be in one way better if everybody was blind rather than some blind and some sighted. Since the Levelling Down Objection is particularly forceful in situations where individuals fall below certain thresholds, the Objection loses much of its force if we adopt some conditional egalitarian principle, which favors equality only if it does not jeopardize sufficiency.⁵⁸ Thus, employing a supplementary principle of sufficiency allows levelling down egalitarians to avoid the most counterintuitive consequences of their view, and ensure that it appears at worst unappealing, rather than shocking or perverse. On this view, which we may call *Sufficiency-Constrained Levelling Down Egalitarianism*, it is not better in *any* respect if everyone becomes blind or destitute. But it may be better in *one* respect if equality is increased even if this involves the extremely rich descending to the level of the very rich. Of course, some of the problems besetting sufficiency, such as the arbitrariness of the threshold, will be inherited by this pluralist approach. However, if the varieties of Non-Levelling Down Egalitarianism previously discussed are untenable, this hybrid seems preferable to unrestricted Levelling Down.

⁵⁷ Note that an appeal to critical thresholds might also solve more general philosophical problems, such as Derek Parfit's Mere Addition Paradox. For relevant discussion, see C. Blackorby, W. Bossert, and D. Donaldson, "Critical Level Utilitarianism and the Population-Ethics Dilemma," *Economics and Philosophy* 13 (1997): 260-84.

⁵⁸ Consider Temkin's response to the Beverly Hills case: "In a world where each year 'well over 10 million children die...of easily preventable causes, I rail at the prospect of the Rich or the Super-Rich getting yet more bottles of fine wine. My thought is: 'a pox on both alternatives.'" *Ibid.*, 771. He may smile at the prospect of the wine being spilled, but not at the prospect of the wine infecting everybody with a blinding pox.

Sufficiency-Constrained Levelling Down Egalitarianism, however, may be rejected both by those who *endorse* and by those who *reject* Levelling Down. The former may argue that a similar solution can be achieved without having to add an arbitrary, non-egalitarian principle, by restricting levelling down to those above the mean or with more than an equal share, rather than to those with enough. The latter may argue that even restricted levelling down is unacceptable and propose some other revision or even a wholesale rejection of equality in favor of priority. Priority, however, as we shall now see, faces a powerful objection which may also be solved by a sufficiency principle.

(ii) *Addressing Transmitter Room*

Though the priority view is less prone than distribution-insensitive conceptions of beneficence, like utilitarianism, to imply excessively aggregative conclusions, moderate versions of the view may still impose serious burdens on less advantaged individuals in order to ensure that many more advantaged individuals enjoy a large number of trivial benefits. For illustration, suppose a child has wandered into the transmitter room of some television station broadcasting live the World Cup Final.⁵⁹ Electrical equipment has fallen on her, crushing her hand, and causing her painful electrical shocks. Fortunately she can be rescued immediately, but unfortunately doing so would interrupt the transmission, disappointing a huge audience. If the audience is sufficiently large, utilitarians will leave the child to suffer until the match ends. Given that the child is less advantaged than the audience, the choice is more complex for prioritariness. Assuming they do not attach lexical priority to benefiting less advantaged individuals, they also take into consideration the size of the audience and the benefit they derive from the transmission. Thus, if the number of viewers and their frustration is sufficiently large, prioritariness will also leave the child

⁵⁹ I amend Scanlon's well-known example by replacing an employee with a wandering child in order to avoid complications, such as those deriving from contractual liabilities. See *What We Owe to Each Other*, 235.

to suffer.

Those otherwise drawn to the priority view might attempt to avoid this unappealing implication by embracing *Sufficiency-Constrained Prioritarianism*, a hybrid which prohibits leaving some below a critical threshold to serve the interests – including the trivial interests – of those above it. Such an amendment might result in a more plausible form of prioritarianism, and one better equipped to command allegiance, a consideration that both egalitarians and sufficientarians often value highly.

Once again, however, there are reasons to doubt this second attempt to establish a place for some principle of sufficiency. Prioritarians might reply that it is possible to avoid excessive aggregation without employing a principle of sufficiency by granting some, or even lexical, priority to those below the mean or with less than their equal share rather than to those who lack enough.⁶⁰ Others might pursue a quite different route, suggested by an anonymous referee, and argue that the Constrained View rests on a misdiagnosis of the reasons why we think the child should be rescued immediately. According to this reading of Transmitter Room, leaving the child to suffer is unacceptable, but not because she will thereby slip below some decent minimum (either over her whole life or during a segment of it). Even if the child never slips below any threshold, her abandonment is still unacceptable because it sacrifices her weighty interest in avoiding acute suffering for the sake of the audience's trivial interest in enjoying the match.

Suppose the alternative explanation of the child's claim to assistance shows that the priority view's proponents should respond to the Transmitter Room example simply by discounting the satisfaction of trivial interests rather than by adopting a mixed conception like *Sufficiency-Constrained Prioritarianism*. Nevertheless, related examples in which the interests at stake are non-trivial suggest that it would be too hasty to conclude that sufficiency principles are always dispensable.

⁶⁰ As mentioned, see Vallentyne, "Equality, Efficiency and the Priority of the Worse Off."

For illustration, replace the wandering child with the *octogenarian bon viveur*, a woman whose life has already been so successful that it will lie well above any critical threshold applicable to whole lives. Unfortunately, the octogenarian's days in the sun have now run out and she faces some final years of acute indignities. Fortunately, however, she can be spared those indignities but only at the expense of several teenagers whose lives will be far less successful than hers, but who will not fall below any critical threshold for any substantial period. Finally, we can add that the benefits denied to the teenagers are far from trivial, but will reverberate through their many remaining years, and so be larger than those provided to the octogenarian.

Faced with the choice between benefiting the octogenarian or the teenagers, it is not implausible to believe that even when the prioritarian calculus favors benefiting the latter, it would be wrong to allow the octogenarian to fall below some critical threshold during the last segment of her life. If such a conviction is sound, then there is still a place for certain types of sufficiency principle within distributive ethics. Again, however, some may argue that the case of the octogenarian does not show the need for sufficiency principles, but some other problem, like the shortcomings of any principle, whether sufficientarian, egalitarian, or prioritarian, which focuses exclusively on a complete life view.⁶¹ For others still, what the example shows is that there are limits on individuals' entitlements to make *intrapersonal* distributive decisions to consume resources in ways that leave them in desperate straits later. This suggestion leads us to a final hybrid, which seems far more promising than the previous two hybrids since it addresses a problem for which there are fewer simple solutions.

(iii) *Tempering Luck Egalitarianism*

Consider a situation in which everyone enjoys the same opportunities, there are no reasons of paternalism to restrict any

⁶¹ See Dennis McKerlie, "Equality and Time," *Ethics* 99 (1989): 475-491, and Temkin, *Inequality*, Ch. 8.

individual's voluntary choices, and individuals voluntarily choose to employ their opportunities very differently, leaving some individuals far worse off than others. Are there any limits on the costs which disadvantaged individuals may permissibly be left to bear? One widely discussed answer to this question about the relationship between equality (or priority) and responsibility, now dubbed 'luck egalitarianism' by its critics, insists that it is unjust for some individuals to be worse off than others through no choice of their own but denies that inequalities are unjust when produced by variations in voluntary choice against a background of equal opportunity.⁶² Thus characterized, luck egalitarianism implies that justice places no limits on the extent to which individuals can be held responsible for their voluntary choices.

Many critics have argued that luck egalitarianism's extremely permissive attitude towards voluntary inequalities is implausible. Anderson, for example, is adamant that those incapable of functioning as full members of a democratic society should never be abandoned on "the spurious grounds that it is their fault."⁶³ Since Anderson also shares the luck egalitarian opposition to equality of outcome, she rejects both forms of egalitarianism and adopts a sufficiency view. Instead of proposing its wholesale rejection, however, it may be preferable merely to supplement luck egalitarianism with a sufficiency principle that tempers its concern for choice and responsibility. We might, then, favor a form of *Sufficiency-Constrained Luck Egalitarianism*, which allows some inequalities in outcome may arise justly, but denies that individuals' having less than enough is ever justifiable by appeal to voluntary choice.

⁶² Elizabeth Anderson coined the term in "What is the Point of Equality?," *Ethics* 109 (1999): 287-337. For statements that most closely resemble the view of responsibility Anderson rejects, see Arneson, "Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare," *Philosophical Studies* 56 (1989): 77-93, and G. A. Cohen, "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice," *Ethics* 99 (1989): 906-944.

⁶³ See Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?," 289. For criticism, see Arneson, "Luck Egalitarianism and Prioritarianism," *Ethics* 110 (2000): 346-349 and "Why Justice Requires Transfers," 191-193.

Some might object that this hybrid view lacks a coherent rationale because of the intermittent role it attributes to choice in legitimizing inequality and insufficiency. The role, however, can be coherently explained by appeal to the different costs and benefits of permitting choice-generated inequality and choice-generated insufficiency. Maintaining equality of outcome involves restricting individuals' choices, or extending their liabilities for others' choices, to an excessive degree.⁶⁴ By contrast, preserving sufficiency tends to require less costly restrictions on liberty. For example, one may attach considerable value to the freedom to drive, climb, or smoke, but not the freedom to drive without seat-belts, climb uninsured, or smoke without paying the taxes that finance medical care. Moreover, the cost of witnessing insufficiency, both to individuals and for a society's moral environment, is greater than the cost of witnessing inequality. An awareness of the deaths of uninsured drivers, climbers, and smokers, is far worse than awareness that those individuals simply fare less well than others.⁶⁵ On the whole, the proposed compromise balances freedom, equality and sufficiency avoiding the most disastrous outcomes at a plausibly modest price, and thus seems more appealing than its less pluralist alternatives.

VI. RAWLSIAN SUFFICIENCY: THREE PRINCIPLES

According to the hybrid just described, we are entitled to make choices that can result in us becoming better or worse off than others but there are limits on our decision-making powers to fall below certain thresholds, or risk doing so. In this final section, we turn to an important version of this hybrid, in which a concern to

⁶⁴ For this explanation of the appeal of luck egalitarianism over equality of outcome, see Williams, 'Liberty, Equality, and Property,' J. S. Dryzek, B. Honig and A. Phillips (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). For sceptical remarks, see Samuel Scheffler, "Choice, Circumstance, and the Value of Equality," *Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (2005): 5-28, 27, n.19.

⁶⁵ As in other hybrid views, the problem of arbitrariness in specifying the threshold does not disappear, but merely becomes less pressing because of the more modest role it plays.

preserve sufficiency also shapes the contours of individual liberty: Rawls's conception of justice as fairness. Having previously shown that Rawls's view withstands various elements in the sufficientarian critique, including the charge of inefficiency, my concluding remarks will suggest that justice as fairness already contains some of the most appealing convictions animating the sufficientarian critique, as well as various threshold principles more plausible than those sufficientarians propose.⁶⁶

To understand the suggestion, one should bear in mind that Rawls's difference principle, discussed earlier, operates alongside other supplementary requirements that, like sufficiency principles, state satiable and non-comparative political objectives.⁶⁷ One such supplement, a *guaranteed social minimum*, was already mentioned at the start of this paper, when noting Rawls's claim that any reasonable conception of justice should offer "measures ensuring for *all citizens* adequate all-purpose means to make effective use of their freedoms."⁶⁸ One might think that since the difference principle is already maximally beneficial to the least advantaged, a further guaranteed minimum is redundant. The need for such a supplement can be explained, however, by recalling that the difference principle requires maximizing the *lifetime* expectations of some representative member of the least advantaged *group*, and so permits *all* members of the group to fall temporarily below a minimum, and even permits *some* members to fall permanently below.⁶⁹ A guaranteed minimum is an attractive supplement to the difference principle because it rules out such undesirable outcomes. Moreover, it is also noteworthy that the principle of basic liberty takes lexical priority over the difference principle, and so constrains

⁶⁶ Note my claim is comparative; I do not claim that the thresholds involved in Rawls's view are precise and unproblematic.

⁶⁷ See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 244-245, 251-252, 278-280, and *Collected Papers*, 88-89, 141-142, 144-145, 148, 440, 537. See also *Political Liberalism*, 228 and *Justice as Fairness*, 47-48, where a social minimum "providing the basic needs of all citizens" is described as a constitutional essential.

⁶⁸ Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," 582, italics added.

⁶⁹ See *A Theory of Justice*, 56 and 82-84; *Collected Papers* 258-259; and Philippe Van Parijs, "Difference Principles", Freeman (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Rawls* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 113ff.

the means available to maximize the prospects of the least advantaged. In contrast, the means available to protect citizens from absolute deprivation are limited to a lesser degree since the social minimum is not subordinated to the basic liberty principle in the same way. Thus, the social minimum offsets the stringency attached to the liberty principle, which Rawls himself concedes may “appear extreme”,⁷⁰ and at the same time helps ensure that the basic liberties, so stringently protected by that principle, do not remain “merely formal”⁷¹ but can effectively be enjoyed by every citizen. Far from being redundant, the social minimum is therefore most useful to balance the core values in justice as fairness.

Some, however, may still find that balance unsatisfactory and argue that the extreme priority granted to the liberty principle leaves insufficient moral space to implement egalitarian policies, or even prevents the difference principle from having “any bite at all.”⁷² One may respond to this criticism, noting not only the above-mentioned considerations regarding the social minimum but also that Rawls revised his earlier view that the liberty principle requires “the most extensive total system” of freedom,⁷³ and suggested the principle is better construed as a satiable requirement, requiring a system of liberties “fully adequate” for the development and exercise of citizens’ moral powers.⁷⁴ Implementing a principle that protects sufficient rather than maximum liberty should leave room for implementing other principles –including those restricting permissible inequalities–, even when it takes priority over them.

Note too how the difference principle is constrained by a further requirement, the *just savings principle*, which commands earlier generations to accumulate, or conserve, enough material resources for future generations to be able to enjoy just liberal

⁷⁰ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 55.

⁷¹ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 324-331.

⁷² See Jan Narveson, “Rawls on Equal Distribution of Wealth,” *Philosophia* (1978): 281-292, 281. See also Van Parijs, “Difference Principles,” 244ff.

⁷³ See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 220 and 266.

⁷⁴ See Rawls, “The Basic Liberties and Their Priority,” Stephen Darwall, *Equal Freedom* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1995), 107. See also 148ff. or *Political Liberalism*, 324.

institutions.⁷⁵ As well as offering guidance regarding the contributions different generations should make to the process of accumulation, the principle rejects any insatiable requirement to increase income and wealth indefinitely and instead affirms a target for, and upper limit on, mandatory saving. As Rawls explains, “once just institutions are firmly established and all the basic liberties effectively realized, *the net accumulation asked for falls to zero*. At this point a society meets its duty of justice by maintaining just institutions and *preserving...a material base sufficient to establish effective just institutions* within which the basic liberties can all be realized.”⁷⁶

Some of Rawls’s comments on the irrelevance of continued material accumulation resemble Frankfurt’s remarks except that the former target affluence, rather than equality.⁷⁷ For example, Rawls memorably explains that “the last stage at which saving is called for is not one of great abundance”, because “what men want is meaningful work in free association with others...within a framework of just basic institutions. To achieve this state of things great wealth is not necessary. In fact, beyond some point it is more likely to be a positive hindrance, a meaningless distraction at best if not a temptation to indulgence and emptiness.”⁷⁸

Rawls’s satiable requirements, however, have important theoretical advantages over Frankfurt’s. For example, the *location* of the threshold invoked by the just savings principle depends on empirical assumptions about the material preconditions for sustainable liberal institutions rather than on intuitionist stipulations about the point at which lives become “sufficiently good”. The very *existence* of a threshold, and not just its location, is also easier to accept in the first case. Moreover, Rawls’s claim that once the relevant institutions are secured, there is no need to carry on

⁷⁵ See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 121, 251-258, 318, *Collected Papers*, 145-147, 275-276 and *Political Liberalism*, 20, 273-74, where his earlier view is revised in light of Jane English, “Justice Between Generations,” *Philosophical Studies* 31 (1977): 91-104, 98.

⁷⁶ *A Theory of Justice*, 255-256, italics added.

⁷⁷ “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” 21 and 23.

⁷⁸ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 257-58. Cf. Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal,” 21-23.

accumulating for that purpose, hardly requires an argument. By contrast, Frankfurt's outright rejection of equality and priority is not directly connected to the identification of a threshold. One may grant the existence of Frankfurt's threshold, but believe it has different *implications*. Finally, Rawls's account is concerned not merely to reach a threshold but to distribute the costs of doing so *in a fair manner*. Thus, unlike a pure sufficiency view, the account offers guidance regarding the relative contributions various groups or generations should make to the accumulation process.⁷⁹ These differences enable Rawls to provide more intelligible foundations for his principles than Frankfurt, as well as clearer guidance for public policy.

As my preceding observations suggest, Rawls is no less aware than sufficientarians of the importance of eliminating deprivation, preserving allegiance, avoiding inefficiency and rejecting exaggerated views of the value of wealth. This should be unsurprising since justice as fairness is a complex view, in which the difference principle is conjoined to at least three further requirements, concerned with civil liberties, a social minimum, and the sustainability of liberal institutions. It should arguably be more surprising that Rawls is one of the main targets of Frankfurt's contribution to the sufficientarian campaign against contemporary egalitarianism. Here I hope to have shown not only that such a campaign fails but also that some of the more plausible sufficiency principles stated to date were already key components of the leading statement of contemporary egalitarianism.

⁷⁹ See Rawls's discussion of how much each generation should save in *A Theory of Justice*, 252-255.