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Published in:
Journal of Applied Philosophy

DOI:
[10.1111/japp.12364](https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12364)

Publication date:
2019

Document version:
Accepted manuscript

Citation for published version (APA):
Nielsen, L. (2019). Sufficiency and Satiabile Values. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 36(5), 800-816.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12364>

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Sufficiency and Satiabile Values

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This is a late draft version of a paper published in *Journal of Applied Philosophy*: DOI:10.1111/japp.12364

Abstract This paper identifies value-satiability sufficientarianism as a distinctive version of the sufficiency view, which has been ignored in the literature on distributive justice. This is unfortunate because value-satiability sufficientarianism is much better equipped than alternative sufficiency views to cope with the standard objections against sufficiency. Most often, sufficientarianism refers to satiability as a feature of moral principles and reasons. But value-satiability sufficientarianism also invokes satiability in the space of value-theory, as it determines the sufficiency threshold at the point where justice-relevant values have been completely fulfilled. The paper gives examples of how this view is widely apparent in the literature, and it provides some reasons in its favour. It then presents the two standard objections against sufficientarianism—the *threshold objection* and the *indifference objection*—and argues that these critiques do not apply to value-satiability sufficientarianism. The general argument of the paper therefore proves sufficientarianism more difficult to refute than it is commonly being credited for.

Introduction

There is currently a heated ongoing debate about the prospects of sufficientarianism, or the sufficiency view—i.e. the view that justice is fulfilled when everyone has enough—as an alternative to egalitarianism. Sufficientarian views of all colours are under attack for being theoretically arbitrary; morally over-demanding; and not least negligent of other moral concerns such as equality, responsibility, and non-discrimination. Ironically, there has been a simultaneous increase in the appeal to sufficientarian principles in more applied fields of normative theory—such as health care ethics¹—as well as in the field of welfare state inequality.² This paper makes two important contributions to this literature. First, it

elaborates a version of the sufficiency view built around value-foundational satiability that is often ignored by critics. This view determines the sufficiency threshold at the point where justice-relevant values have been completely fulfilled. Call this *value-satiability sufficientarianism*. The paper gives examples of how this interpretation of sufficientarianism is widely apparent in the literature, and it provides some reasons in its favour. Second, it presents the two standard objections against sufficientarianism—*the threshold objection* and *the indifference objection*—and argues that these critiques do not apply to value-satiability sufficientarianism. On these grounds, the paper concludes that value-satiability sufficientarianism is a more theoretically plausible theory of distributive justice than its competitors.

My argument proceeds as follows. First, I introduce sufficientarianism as a generic view about distributive justice and I distinguish between “shift-sufficientarianism” and “upper-limit sufficientarianism”. Second, I show how the logic of satiability can play a role on both a moral-theoretical and value-theoretical level in sufficientarian theory. Third, I introduce value-satiability sufficientarianism, and I give examples of this interpretation and some reasons to defend it. Fourth, I introduce *the threshold objection* and *the indifference objection*, and I show how these objections have no force against value-satiability sufficientarianism. Rather, these critiques tend to misrepresent the view as if it was concerned with insatiability of value by giving hypothetical examples with “empty” numerical figures. *Call this the numbers fallacy*. The final section concludes.

The Sufficiency View

At the heart of any sufficientarian view lies the belief that justice is concerned with securing a level of sufficiency for everyone and is not concerned with mere comparative differences.³ In recent writings, the sufficiency view has been defended in many different forms of which I shall elaborate a few below. But before accounting for any particular specifications of the view, I wish to introduce sufficientarianism as a generic idea about distributive justice.

Sufficientarianism about distributive justice

Distributive justice requires that everyone is above some threshold T , where T represents “enough” for justice to be completely sated.

Sufficientarianism about distributive justice is a demanding position about distributions, because not only does it say something about what justice *requires* but also when justice *is fulfilled*. In a nutshell, sufficientarianism about justice provides a “deficiency claim”—that someone is suffering from a deficiency with respect to a relevant threshold. The standard sufficientarian view interprets the deficiency claim in a strong version—as both a necessary and sufficient condition for distributive injustice. Hence, it follows from this view that there cannot be any distributive injustice above the threshold, where no one is suffering any relevant threshold-deficiency. This latter implication is often termed the negative thesis of sufficientarianism.⁴ This strong version has therefore recently been called “upper-limit” sufficientarianism due to its inherent message of their being an upper limit to requirements of distributive justice. Although the negative thesis is assumed in most readings of the sufficiency view, there is in fact some disagreement about its status as a necessary element of sufficientarianism. Liam Shields, most notably, defends a weaker version of the deficiency

claim. He denies the negative thesis and, in its place, adopts the “shift-thesis”—that a threshold (merely) expresses a significant change in the weight of our reasons to benefit people further.⁵ One implication, then, of Shields’ shift-sufficientarianism is that you can have reasons of justice to benefit people who are already above the relevant threshold. These reasons will just be significantly less weighty than reasons to benefit people who are below.

We can capture the distinction between upper-limit sufficientarianism and shift-sufficientarianism in the following specifications of the generic principle of sufficientarianism about distributive justice.

Upper limit sufficientarianism about distributive justice

Distributive justice requires that everyone is above some threshold T , where T represents “enough” for our reasons of justice to be completely sated. Above T , there can be no injustice and thus no justice-relevant reasons for further redistribution applies.

Shift sufficientarianism about distributive justice

Distributive justice requires that everyone is above some threshold T , where T represents “enough” for one reason of justice to be completely sated. Above T , this specific reason of justice to redistribute has become irrelevant but other less weighty reasons of justice may apply. Hence, T expresses is a significant change in the weight of our reasons to benefit people.

The disagreement between Shields' shift-sufficientarianism and the more traditional upper-limit sufficientarianism is an important one, and I shall have something to say about it later. In fact, what I argue in this paper can be taken as a defence of a certain form of upper-limit sufficientarianism, or a philosophical grounding of it, but in order to get to that, I want to introduce another distinction that relates to the dispute just mentioned but is importantly theoretically distinct. The distinction I want to draw is concerned with the theoretical space in which satiability is claimed to apply. It is certain that satiability plays an important role in any theorising about sufficiency, but the question remains on what theoretical level sufficientarians place the role of satiability. More particularly, it matters whether the satiability in sufficientarianism is only applicable to sufficiency as a moral theory, its principles and reasons, or it also subscribes to satiability within the underlying theory of values. This is the topic of the next section.

Satiable principles and satiable values

In this section, I shall anticipate a distinction between moral-theoretical use of satiability and a value-theoretical use of satiability. I shall use this distinction in the coming section to describe different foundations of the sufficiency threshold. Thus, it is important here to distinguish between moral theory and value theory and keep in mind how these two theoretical dimensions are distinct but often related. I believe the fact that this distinction crosses the bridge to value-theory helps to explain why it has so far been overlooked in the literature on sufficiency and distributive justice. And as my argument reveals, this is unfortunate since the question of value-satiability has profound influence over the function and relevance of distributive principles. Thus, sufficientarians, and justice theorists in

general, ought to be aware and very often explicit about their value-theoretical foundation of their moral principles.

We get a quite clear understanding of what it means for a moral *principle* to be satiable in the following passage from Joseph Raz.

Satiable principles are marked by one feature: the demands the principles impose can be completely met. When they are completely met then whatever may happen and whatever might have happened the principles cannot be, nor could they have been, satisfied to a higher degree.⁶

All sufficientarians accept satiability in this sense but apply it differently to their moral theory. Upper-limit sufficientarians believe that, as a *principle*, justice is in and off itself satiable. On Crisp's compassion-based account of sufficientarianism, "the notion of compassion, then, used in conjunction with the notion of an impartial spectator, may provide us with the materials for an account of distribution", which Crisp in the following sentence presents as a non-arbitrary "threshold account of justice".⁷ Hence, Crisp's sufficientarianism can be read as a theoretical construction with two conjoined elements of satiability, a satiable distributive principle of justice, based on a satiable moral reason of (impartial) compassion. Both of these elements, however, concerns satiability at a moral theory level. At the level of welfare at which an impartial spectator's feeling of compassion for a person gives out, this particular person is sufficiently well-off for the principle of distributive justice to be fulfilled.⁸ Upper-limit sufficientarians following Crisp have in a similar vein adopted sufficiency as a satiable principle.⁹

But shift-sufficientarianism similarly refers to the importance of moral-theoretical satiability. Liam Shields explicitly refers to the above passage from Raz in order to distinguish satiable *reasons* from other moral reasons. According to Shields, these satiable reasons exist only as pro tanto reasons among other non-satiable reasons.¹⁰ Consequently, benefitting a person sufficiently in accordance with a satiable reason implies a “significant change” in the weight of our moral reasons, because this reason now becomes irrelevant, but other reasons for benefitting the person further might still be of moral importance. To voice Shields’ own everyday morality example, if one person needs money for a bus ticket, this gives us one reason to benefit her which can be fully sated, but this does not necessarily imply that we have no reasons to benefit her once she is safely on the bus.

There is clearly, then, a necessary connection between satiability and sufficiency but most often, satiability is here understood as a part of the distinctive logic of sufficientarianism as a distributive principle or a set of moral reasons. But we might invoke satiability also at the level of value-theory. Raz himself does not only appeal to satiability as a feature of (some) theoretical principles such as sufficiency. He also believes that happiness is in itself a satiable value. That is, Raz not only thinks that our reasons to benefit people stemming from moral principles might have a point of satiation—e.g. such as implying the response, “I have done enough for my moral duties to be fulfilled”—he also defends a satiable account of the good life. This is evident both from his account of proper happiness and his emphasis on the value of autonomy for leading authentically good lives.

Raz builds his sufficientarian moral theory around this value-satiability. This becomes evident in his rejection of egalitarianism and utilitarianism—and his rejection of egalitarians’ critique of utilitarians. Raz convincingly argues that egalitarians misconceive the problem

with utilitarianism, because they implicitly accept the false utilitarian assumption that the greatest good of happiness is infinitely accumulative and that the distributive principles are therefore non-diminishing. But, Raz argues, happiness is not infinitely accumulative as utilitarians believe. While hedonist pleasure might be so, in the sense that we can always produce an extra unit of welfare, happiness is a satiable value. Raz explains,

The fact that the pursuit of happiness is a diminishing principle is in part explained by the satiability of happiness. Having had a happy childhood does not assure one of a happy adolescence. But a happy childhood, even if happy through the pleasures experienced during it only, can be perfectly happy. It can be so happy that adding pleasures to it would not make it happier.¹¹

Expressed in terms of my distinctions, Raz here refers to the satiable feature of the moral-theoretical principle of the pursuit of happiness as diminishing as “in part” explained by the underlying value-theoretical feature of happiness being a satiable value. Inspired by Raz, we can provide a broader description of value-satiability as such:

Satiability about value

For any value to be satiable it must be the case that its value-dimension is *finite*, in the sense that it has a point of complete satiation, and *diminishing* in that benefitting some person on this value dimension diminishes the deficiency from complete satiation.

Value-satiability obviously stands in direct contrast to value-insatiability. A value that is insatiable is thus infinitely beneficial and non-diminishing. Utilitarianism, for example, in its most common interpretations adopts a value-insatiable form of welfarism as its value theory. That is, they assume, a person can always gain one additional unit of utility.

What matters to my argument here is not so much value-satiability in itself (as in contrast to value-insatiability) but whether the construction of the threshold within a sufficientarian theory of justice is founded on value-satiability, or alternatively a mere result of sufficientarian distributive justice being a satiable principle. In other words, the question is whether the threshold level of sufficiency is determined by satiability of the values relevant for justice, or not. To this question, I now turn.

Value-Satiability Sufficientarianism

We can now begin to see the contours of value-satiability sufficientarianism. It is a type of upper-limit sufficientarianism that builds the foundation of the (upper) threshold around satiable values. Hence, one can reject value-satiability sufficientarian and still be a sufficientarian in two ways. First, since founding the threshold upon satiable values commits to the strong negative thesis, value-satiability sufficientarianism must imply upper-limit sufficiency. Thus, for example, shift-sufficientarianism falls out of what I here call value-satiability sufficientarianism. We can capture the appeal to satiability that shift-sufficientarianism employ under the name, *narrow, moral-theory satiability*.

Narrow, moral-theory satiability: *T* represents “enough” for **one reason** of justice to be completely sated. Above *T*, this reason is irrelevant but other less weighty reasons

may apply. Hence, T expresses a significant change in the weight of our reasons to benefit people.

Second, you can be an upper-limit sufficientarian but deny that the relevant threshold is determined by value-satiability. Crisp and Benbaji's utilitarian-inspired sufficientarian accounts are examples of this. Their thresholds are built around the amount of utility that the principle of justice requires for one to have, not the level at which the desire for utility is completely met. Again, this is a moral-theoretical appeal to satiability, but to distinguish it from the role of satiability within shift-sufficientarianism, we can call this *wide, moral-theoretical satiability* because it encapsulates all our reasons of justice.

Wide, moral-theoretical satiability: *T represents “enough” for the principle of justice to be completely sated. Above T, claims for redistribution is irrelevant, since inequalities at this point are beyond the scope of justice.*

What these accounts have in common is that they apply satiability only in the space of moral-theory, not in the space of value. Value-satiability sufficientarianism is different because it finds an upper-limit threshold on satiable values. Hence, the appeal to satiability is thicker than merely moral-theoretical. Let us call this use of satiability, *value-foundational satiability*.

Value-foundational satiability: *T* represents “enough” for **the relevant value(s)** of justice to be sated. Above *T*, claims for redistribution is irrelevant, since justice-relevant inequalities cannot exist.

As I shall present in this section, a significant number of sufficientarian positions fall within value-satiability sufficientarianism. Moreover, as I shall argue, we have good reasons to defend upper-limit sufficientarianism in reference to value-satiability. Before I come to this, let me elaborate how value-satiability can be used as a foundation of the upper limit, and introduce value-satiability sufficientarianism as distinct account of sufficientarianism.

I use foundational theory here in a way similar to Shelly Kagan’s use of the term in regard to theories in normative ethics.¹² Analogous to the function of Kagan’s foundational theories of ethics, which is to offer an explanation and justification of the favoured list of normative factors, so I take it that foundational theories of distributive justice offer an explanation and justification of the necessary components of the favoured distributive theory. That is, foundational theories would have to be able to explain and justify the currency and the pattern-principle of the theory in question. In a discussion of the essential elements in any sufficientarian theory, Axelsen and Nielsen argue in a similar vein that sufficiency thresholds must entail theoretical “thickness”, by which they understand both the description of the threshold’s necessary parts—such as currency—and its normative justification.¹³ What they request then is a foundational theory of the distributive ideal of sufficiency.

Telic egalitarian theories, such as welfare-based luck egalitarianism, build upon a foundational theory that states that distributive justice refers to the value of comparative fairness.¹⁴ This theory is foundational in that it explains and justifies the components of this

egalitarian framework. It explains why the distributions should be responsibility-sensitive and bad-luck-compensating, and it explains why the distributive component should be equality. Once we see the underlying foundational function of the value of comparative fairness, we understand why telic egalitarians are easily disturbed by numerical cases. If some have 1000 while others are left with only 9, and the causes of this distributive scenario are arbitrary, it certainly seems to give rise to reasonable individual complaints based on unfairness. The content of the referent of the numerical figures are unnecessary. The unfairness is plainly derived from the arbitrariness together with the numerical distance between the two groups. Consequently, the simple fact that there is an arbitrary distance between two groups are enough to disturb telic egalitarians.

But most upper-limit sufficientarianism rejects comparative fairness as the foundational theory of distributive justice and must therefore provide an alternative foundational theory in its place. Of course, there are various sufficientarian theories and different versions are, as mentioned, built on different theories but value-satiability can certainly play the role of foundational theory for the upper-limit threshold. Thus, sufficientarians in justifying the threshold may appeal to the following foundational theory:

Foundational satiability

For any good to be relevant for distributive justice, it would have to benefit someone on a value-dimension that is in principle satiable, and de-facto non-sated.

Foundational satiability determines the threshold as an upper limit because it interprets the “deficiency claim” as a claim about the presence of a non-sated value. It follows from

foundational satiability that no distributive good (or bundle of goods) that is relevant to justice can have a comparable value if given to people below the point of satiability as if given to people above that point. This, then, naturally gives rise to a distributive threshold at the point of satiability. Hence, foundational satiability implies distributive upper-limit sufficientarianism. Note, however, that whereas satiability about values was a view about value-theory, foundational satiability more narrowly determines the type of values relevant for justice. Thus, it is in principle possible to accept satiability about values—e.g. Raz’s view that happiness is satiable—without this necessarily committing you to a sufficiency view about justice—e.g. you could accept that happiness is satiable and still insist that justice is fulfilled as long as everyone has equal opportunity for a non-perfect level of happiness. But foundational satiability does, on the other hand, commit to upper-limit sufficientarianism. That Raz also endorsed value-satiability sufficientarianism is clear from his statement that our political concern is not with inequality per se, but with “the hunger of the hungry, the need of the needy, the suffering of the ill, and so on”.¹⁵

Value-satiability sufficientarianism assumes that the relevant value is (or relevant values are) satiable and that distributive justice is fulfilled if and only if the distribution is such that the everyone is sated in regards to the relevant value(s). In other words, satiable-value sufficientarianism identifies the threshold as the point above which any person will not become better-off in terms of the relevant value by having more of whatever can be allocated to her. Thus—in contrast to value-insatiability sufficientarianism—here the upper limit is founded on that it is impossible for any human person to be relevantly better-off than this in terms of justice-relevant values. Thus, value-satiability sufficientarianism applies value-foundational satiability to set the threshold.

The distinctions drawn here also relates to information about currency. A welfarist sufficientarian that lends much in terms of value-theory from traditional utilitarianism will likely reject value-foundational satiability. Certainly, at any point of utility or preference-satisfaction, you could in principle enjoy additional units of welfare, so it seems that a welfarist sufficiency view would not accept value-satiability, and merely apply satiability in relation to the sufficiency principle of distributive justice. Roger Crisp takes sufficiency to imply that we ought to give priority to a two-unit utility benefit (22-24) for people below the threshold (threshold at 25) over an even much larger utility benefit (26-100) for people above the threshold.¹⁶ Hence, Crisp clearly does not ground the threshold upon satiability of value.

However, although welfarism is normally interpreted in this insatiable sense, welfarist sufficientarianism does not commit to value-insatiability. Certainly—although this is rarely seen today—a utilitarianism founded on Epicurean hedonism would commit to a form of value-satiability sufficientarianism with a quite low threshold.¹⁷ Robert Huseby's sufficientarianism adopts a welfarist currency and locates the upper threshold at the point of reasonable contentment.¹⁸ At that point, an individual is either content—understood as actually sated in terms of her preferences—or she is being unreasonable. Although this goes against traditional utilitarian-catering sum-ranking of welfare, it is not unheard of, nor is it implausible, to interpret the value of welfare in such a way. As we found in Raz, happiness accurately understood would be a satiable value. Moreover, as famously stated by Adam Smith, where he engages with inspirations from Epicurean value-theory, “the pleasures of vanity and superiority are seldom consistent with perfect tranquillity, the principle and foundation of all real and satisfactory enjoyment”.¹⁹ Raz and Smith's conception of happiness—and thereby their rejection of a utilitarian account of value—seems compatible

with the general line in Huseby's upper limit threshold of reasonable contentment and it is certainly emphasising a value-satiability assumption. Thus, it is possible to interpret a welfarist standard in such a way.

If you are not a welfarist sufficientarian, you will typically build your distributive theory of sufficiency around a currency such as capabilities²⁰, autonomy²¹, or freedom.²² But all these currencies seem most likely to assume a value-foundational satiability. On Nussbaum's account, "being capable" in a general sense is having adequate effective access to all her ten listed functionings.²³ Here, the upper limit is founded on having effective access to central human functionings, which stipulates that it is meaningless to talk about having even more access. And autonomy and freedom are similarly cut-off point values.²⁴ You do not become any more autonomous or free by having additional resources or opportunities, once you have achieved your freedom.

What reasons do we have to accept foundational satiability and thus defend a form of value-satiability sufficientarianism? One immediate reason invokes Thomas Scanlon's objective criterion for distinguishing between objective urgent preference—or what a person effectively needs—from non-urgent preferences such as subjective desires.²⁵ If justice concerns the distribution of goods of relevance to people as determined by an objective criterion, then distributive goods make people better off because they benefit them on a satiable value-dimension. Regardless of whether people like to engage in religious rituals or not, their religious freedom is important because their need for freedom of religion ought to be sated. Similarly, people's basic health needs ought to be protected as a matter of distributive justice, because they are objectively important for how well their lives are going,

independent of whether they would prefer differently.²⁶ And being adequately healthy is a satiable value.

Value-satiability sufficientarians refer to something like Scanlon's objective criterion. Autonomy-catering sufficientarians, for example, determine the threshold in terms of necessary requirements for living an autonomous life.²⁷ Since autonomy requires an environment in which a human person can choose between different valuable life-plans, certain sets of opportunities and resources are prerequisites for any autonomous life. Yet, on the other hand, since no one gets any more autonomous from having even more goods than what they need for leading an autonomous life,²⁸ there will be a point at which autonomy is relevantly sated.

Michael Blake explicates this often overlooked implication of autonomy-catering views about distributive justice when he argues that, "If holdings of goods are relevant for the options they open up to us—as well as, perhaps, the ways in which they make access easier to options we already possess—then it does not seem that we necessarily gain any additional autonomy as our holdings increase past a certain level".²⁹ What Blake is stressing is the sufficientarian distributive implication of grounding a view about justice on the value of autonomy. But, more important for our purpose here, what he is thereby implicitly emphasizing is the foundational satiability of his account—that is, for a distributive good (such as "holdings") to be justice-relevant, it must be responding to a satiable demand, in this case autonomy.

I have here presented and defended value-satiability sufficientarianism as a family of views that found the threshold on satiable values. I have done so in order to show that this version of sufficientarianism is more widely shared than one might believe. At this point,

some might still find that foundational satiability is in itself counterintuitive. Therefore, let me end this section by elaborating how one could construct a sufficiency view about justice around value-satiability in reference to Nussbaum's central human capabilities.³⁰ Capability-sufficientarians in general refer to an objective criterion of well-being—fleshed out as being adequately capable in regards to central human functionings—and thus ground their distributive justice account on foundational satiability.³¹ Importantly, this involves value-pluralism in the form that there exists various incommensurable capability-dimension that are relevant to justice, all of which require sufficiency in their own domain. Thus, Nussbaum's listed central human capabilities should be understood as ten separate capabilities which are each independently necessary for- and only together sufficient for minimal justice to be fulfilled.³² Hence, the list specifies ten value-dimensions—expressing something like Scanlon's objective criterion of relevant needs—all of which are satiable. Hence, capability-sufficiency build upon foundational satiability.

On Nussbaum's account, we could identify two general threshold levels, a *basic capability threshold* and a *comprehensive capability threshold*—each consisting of a set of thresholds corresponding to every capability relevant for reaching that particular threshold. The basic capability threshold is set at the level of basic needs expressed in the language of capabilities—life, health, security etc. This implies a lower threshold because without any of these capabilities, there would not be much of a human life left, and hence more complex capabilities such as practical reason, affiliation, and control over one's environment would never flourish. Thus, it should be given absolute priority to secure that people are above the basic capability threshold.

Above the basic capability threshold, the comprehensive capability threshold is set at the level where everyone is secured all the capabilities on the list. Between the two thresholds, it is reasonable to hold that weighted priority should be given to helping people the further they are below the comprehensive capability threshold, to the extent that interpersonal states can be meaningfully compared—which they can only to some degree due to incommensurability of different forms of capability-deficiency. Above the comprehensive capability threshold, no priority should be given because there are no relevant deficiencies. This higher threshold states the minimal requirement of justice, because no one can here be said to be more capable than others in any justice-relevant space. Surely, one could object, some people could enjoy much higher degrees of, for example, control over the political environment than others, so it seems unlikely that this capability is completely fulfilled at the point of that threshold. But, due to the stark positional aspects of some capabilities such as political influence, it is impossible for one group of people to have much more than others in this capability space without this immediately causing insufficiency for others.³³ This explains why Nussbaum thinks that some capabilities require an equal distribution, while others do not, for minimal justice to be fulfilled.

Foundational satiability explains why the demands of distributive justice is met at the point of the comprehensive threshold, because above this point no one can be better-off than others in any justice-relevant sense without this involving deficiency for others. Justice consideration may still play important roles beyond this point. First, it will be a concern of justice to facilitate social-institutional structures to avoid that inequalities grow so large that they result in positional deficiency. Second, at all levels of capability, there will be some deontic constraints on how people treat each other, and especially how the people are treated

by the state, which will be a significant concern of justice. But as far as distributive justice is concerned, a high threshold level determined by the complete satiation of capability in Nussbaum's spaces for central human functioning seems to express a plausible version of value-satiability sufficientarianism.

In this section, I have introduced the distinction between *narrow, moral-theoretical satiability*; *wide, moral-theoretical satiability*; and *value-foundational satiability*, and I have shown how the latter application of satiability pertains to value-satiability sufficientarianism as a distinctive sufficiency view. I have also invoked Scanlon's objective criterion as one immediate independent reason to defend value-satiability sufficientarianism and I have shown that many of the most plausible sufficiency positions today do in fact employ foundational satiability. In the next section I discuss two standard objections to upper-limit sufficientarianism in general and I argue that value-foundational satiability rescues sufficientarianism from these critiques. Hence, value-satiability sufficientarianism is undefeated by these objections. This provides an additional reason in favour of sufficientarian justice.

How the Standard Objections Miss the Mark

Critics of sufficientarianism often use numerical hypothetical examples. I think political philosophers should be careful with this, and the fact that I believe that satiable values play a central role for our theories of justice partly explains why. But let me here engage with the numerical examples to see how value-foundational satiability can explain why sufficientarianism need not yield to the standard objections.

Say that we identify T as equivalent to 10 units of the relevant currency, so that people having more than 10 is above the threshold, whereas people having less than 10 is below the threshold. Now, imagine that you are asked to rank the following four societies in table 1.

TABLE 1. Four hypothetical distributional scenarios.

	Societies	Minority	Majority
A	Equalencia	9	11
B	Sufficienlandia	10	100
C	Leximania	11	200
D	Maximistan	9	1000

Telic egalitarians would favour Equalencia.³⁴ They believe that an equal distribution of the relevant distributive currency is non-instrumentally valuable, and hence would, *ceteris paribus*, rank the societies straightforwardly from most equal to least equal in the following order: $A > B > C > D$. As the scenario is set up here, the inequality increases as the better-off gets more of the relevant currency, and hence maximisation theories—such as utilitarianism, if the currency is utility—would rank the societies straightforwardly from most total units to least total units, that is: $D > C > B > A$. Maximisation theories would, thus, favour Maximistan.

Leximin prioritarianism, such as Rawls' difference principle would give lexical priority to benefiting the worst off, and would consequently rank the societies in this example only

by looking for the best outcome in the minority column.³⁵ This would result in the rank: $C > B > A \& D$. This need not be true for weighted prioritarianism,³⁶ because the larger weight of the much bigger gain of the majority could outweigh the much smaller benefit to the minority, in which case weighted prioritarians would rank the societies like maximisation theories.

Upper-limit sufficientarianism would be agnostic about the difference between A and D, as well as between B and C. This is so because justice both requires that everyone is at a minimum level of T (at 10) and is fulfilled once everyone reaches this level. Hence, upper-limit sufficientarianism would, *ceteris paribus*, result in the odd ranking: $B \& C > A \& D$. This seems strange, because B and C, as well as A and D entail very different distributions. So, can it really be plausible to withhold this ranking?

Many critics find the ranking not only strange but also intuitively objectionable.³⁷ They normally express themselves in one of the two following standard objections:

The threshold objection

By insisting on the critical importance of crossing the threshold, sufficientarianism allows very small benefits given below the threshold to outweigh either great benefits given above the threshold or other values, but that is implausible.

The indifference objection

By insisting on the fulfilment of justice marked by the threshold, sufficientarianism implies that justice should be indifferent about the distribution above the threshold, but that is implausible.

Let us begin by turning to some examples of the threshold objection. Carl Knight objects to sufficientarianism on the grounds of its odd ranking above, because it implies that we should prefer Sufficienlandia over Equalencia, even though the latter is much more equal and therefore intuitively, as well as technically, favourable.³⁸ The problem is that sufficientarianism allows the importance of reaching the threshold to play the role of a clearly over-riding moral concern which will neglect the value of equality altogether, which Knight finds counterintuitive.

Liam Shields poses a similar critique of upper limit sufficientarianism but from a weighted-prioritarian standpoint.³⁹ Shields' critique points to the odd ranking in that sufficientarianism would prefer Sufficienlandia to Maximistan, even though the latter holds much more aggregate welfare. This, Shields claims, is implausible because it would put a too stark emphasis on reaching the threshold, which would impose too high costs on people above the threshold. Thus, where Knight's version of the objection is based on the intuitive problem inherent in letting the importance of crossing the threshold outweigh the value of equality, Shields is referring to the problem of letting small benefits below the threshold to outweigh very large benefits giving above the threshold.

But note first that, in reply to Shields, this is not a uniquely sufficientarian embarrassment. Telic egalitarians would also prefer Sufficienlandia over Maximistan. That is, on further reflection, it is not at all obvious that our intuitions about this case work in favour of weighted prioritarianism and against other theoretical principles. In fact, the intuition that Shields appeals to here is importantly in direct contradiction with the intuition that Knight uses in his example presented above to justify the same kind of objection against

sufficiency from an egalitarian standpoint. Thus, if the distributive egalitarian intuition that Knight employs against sufficientarianism is in direct opposition to the weighted prioritarian grounds for accepting Shields' version of the same objection, then it seems that the two examples taken together prove each of their respective accounts similarly negligent towards other values or greater benefits given at higher levels as sufficientarianism. This is, of course, not a good enough defence of sufficientarianism. It only shows that its competitors are unsuccessful in coping with a similar problem, not that sufficientarianism is in any way favourable. I will provide a stronger counterargument in defence of upper-limit sufficientarianism below, but first I wish to specify the content of the indifference objection.

Imagine that sufficiency is already achieved like in Sufficienlandia and Leximania. In this case, the sufficiency view implies that distributions are irrelevant from the point of view of justice. But that seems strange, critics say. Sufficientarianism implies that the fact that someone is better off than others does not give rise to justified complaints and demands for redistribution as long as the worst-off are also above the relevant threshold. But this, egalitarians argue, is highly counterintuitive—especially when the difference between the best-off and the worst-off is significant. As Paula Casal has forcefully argued, sufficientarians, if consistent, should be ready to accept not only inequalities within the space of extreme wealth but also significant inequalities between the superrich and the people who barely have enough.⁴⁰ Hence, egalitarians would argue, we have strong distributive reasons to prefer Sufficienlandia in this case, because the inequality here is much smaller than in Leximania, but sufficientarians cannot say that due to their indifference to distributions at these high levels.

On the other hand, prioritarrians would say that we have weighty reasons to prefer Leximania over Sufficienlandia, because Leximania is an improvement for all involved, and hence not doing so would make you vulnerable to the levelling down objection.⁴¹ Hence, although this of course also applies to telic egalitarianism, sufficientarianism is vulnerable to the problem of levelling down by being indifferent between the two distributions so that it would see no problem—of relevance to justice—in levelling the best-off down to the level of wellbeing of the worst-off as long as no one falls below the threshold. One immediate way to defend against the indifference objection is to take the edge of its intuitive force by appealing to a very high threshold, which can be justified for example by proposing a multiple-threshold scheme.⁴² However, as Liam Shields argues, as long as the threshold takes form as an “upper limit”, the indifference objection reveals an intuitive problem on all levels.⁴³ This clearly seems to present a strong challenge to sufficientarianism.

Although it seems that upper-limit sufficientarianism is under heavy attack from the standard objections, once we bring in value-foundational satiability as the ground for the threshold, the objections lose much of their bite. From the perspective of value-satiability sufficientarianism, there is nothing wrong with the sufficientarian guidance in the ranking B & C > A & D. If the threshold is set in reference to value-foundational satiability, it follows that T=10 represents the point of full satiation. Thus, we should not choose between A & D, because the magnitude of deficiency for the minority is the same in both (9), and because the numerical difference between the two scenarios’ majority groups (11 and 1000) cannot meaningfully count for anything in terms of justice-relevant values. Similarly, we should judge B & C equally good since no one is suffering any deficiency in either scenario.

The problem with the standard objections, as they are typically fleshed out, is that in their appeal to numerical hypothetical cases, they leave out an explanation of what the numbers in the examples account for, and thereby falsely come to assume the Archimedean properties of real numbers in their underlying value-theory. In consequence, these objections only speak to value-insatiability, but as I have shown, many sufficientarian views found the threshold on value-satiability. In these cases, the standard objections draw on the intuitive force of *empty* numbers—i.e. numbers that do not have any real or relevant content. Call this *the numbers fallacy*. The numbers fallacy could apply wider than to criticism of sufficientarianism, but I shall leave that aside here. The standard objections to sufficientarianism are expressions of the numbers fallacy when addressed against value-satiability sufficientarianism. For example, the standard objections implicitly assume that a position below the threshold such as 9 ($T - 1$) is straightforwardly numerically comparable to positions above the threshold such as 11 ($T + 1$), such that it makes sense to say that the two positions are equivalently distant from the threshold. But value-satiability sufficientarianism rejects this assumption.

In appealing to value-foundational satiability, we can thus explain why upper-limit sufficientarianism is not troubled by the threshold objection and the indifference objection. In pushing the threshold objection, critics urge upper-limit sufficientarians to provide an explanation for why we should allow very small benefit to outweigh much greater benefits or other values above the threshold. The numbers fallacy in this argument consists in that, since we do not know what the numbers account for, we just immediately assume that the distance between 9 and 10 is very small due to our understanding of the Archimedean property of numbers. But for value-satiability sufficientarians, a threshold at 10 implies that

some significant deficiency from this point of satiation is representing by the number 9. For example, on a capability-sufficiency account, the number 10 would represent the worst-off group in Sufficienlandia being adequately capable—e.g. on all Nussbaum’s dimensions⁴⁴, whereas the worst-off group in Equalencia who are at 9 must be in some form of capability deficiency. To make sense of what 9 could mean here, we could imagine something like living with slight hunger, or being in some danger of bodily assault, or being held out of political influence. The gist of sufficientarianism is that this deficiency—although hidden in the example by the miniscule difference of 1—makes *all* the difference.

And in pushing the indifference objection, critics appeal to the intuition that it cannot be of no importance how far people are above the threshold. But value-foundational satiability explains why this could be. If the threshold is set at the point where justice-relevant values are sated, this implies that the threshold must involve the elimination of all deficiencies relevant to justice. So, at 10, there is no hunger, no destitution, no oppression, no suffering, etc. But if 10 defines such a situation of complete non-deficiency, what could possibly be the reference value of 200 or 1000? Absence of deficiency from satiation is hardly something you can multiply by 100. Examples like this obscure what value-satiability sufficientarianism is concerned with.

So far, I have argued that value-foundational satiability explains why value-satiability sufficientarians need not yield to the standards objection, but this does not imply that sufficientarians are immune to criticism. Value-satiability sufficientarianism seems to be open to another troubling objection, that is sometimes posed against the sufficiency view. This objection states that under non-ideal circumstances, what sufficientarianism presents as an intuitively appealing minimum translates into a social maximum because of the

omnipresence of resource scarcity. As perfectly exemplified by Karl Widerquist in regards to health care and safety, sufficientarian distributive principles will require that we “devote nearly the whole of our economic activity to the attainment of sufficiency for harder and harder cases, but because we will not attain it for everyone, we will have no resources left for anyone to consume above the sufficiency level”.⁴⁵

This is a powerful objection and the relation to the inevitable resource scarcity within health policy clearly marks the relevance of this limitation of sufficiency to real world cases. However, I see a number of ways a value-satiability sufficientarian can respond. First, it is open for sufficientarians to simply bite this bullet and withhold that this problem arises only because non-ideal circumstances cannot live up to our moral ideals. Ideal-theory philosophers often draw attention to the distinction between ideal normative principles and real-world circumstances to respond to objections like this. Hence, we might consider sufficientarianism what Estlund terms a “hopeless aspirational theory” and still wish to defend its moral relevance.⁴⁶

Second, sufficientarians about justice can be pluralists about moral demands. As I initially noted, sufficientarianism is about distributive justice and hence says nothing about other moral demands. So, in consequence, it might be that although justice in fact demands that we sacrifice all consumption above the threshold for the sake of reaching sufficiency, we may have other moral reasons not to live up to this duty. Such a pragmatic reply can never rescue sufficientarianism from theoretical criticism, but since this objection pushes a more practical concern, the reply seems to allow for there being a practical—and in principle consistent—solution. For a promising way to deal with Widerquist’s concern in a way that exemplifies these first two replies, see Norman Daniels’ theory of health justice, where he

distinguishes between, on the one hand, what justice ideally requires in regards to health needs, and on the other hand, how to “meet health needs fairly, when we can’t meet them all.”⁴⁷

Third, a sufficientarian can say that although Widerquist is right to raise this problem against sufficientarianism, it is not a distinctive sufficientarian problem. Lexical prioritarian distributive theories will to a similar extent demand that we give up enormous consumption goods for the benefit of the worse-off—marked by the difference between Leximania and Maximistan in table 1—and so will egalitarian theories, unless they allow for levelling down. The non-ideal problem of Widerquist seems much broader in scope than he accounts for. And at least, sufficiency—in contrast to equality or priority—does promise to have an absolute cut-off point which would make it less overdemanding than its competitors.

To conclude, I have laid out value-foundational satiability as a foundational theory of sufficientarianism and defended it. I have argued that this foundation explains why sufficientarianism need not yield to the standard objections. And although sufficientarianism in all forms are still under attack from Widerquist’s demandingness objection, I have given some general reasons why sufficiency should not be rejected based on this concern.

Conclusion

If value-foundation satiability is correct, we have strong both moral-theoretical and value-theoretical reasons to accept the negative thesis of sufficientarianism—that inequalities above the threshold are irrelevant to justice. But most debates about justice ignore the possibility of value-foundational satiability. In this paper, I have presented value-satiability

sufficientarianism as that distinct sufficiency view that employs value-foundational satiability as it founds the upper-limit threshold upon satiable values. I have shown how many of the well-known contemporary specifications of the sufficiency view are in fact versions of this form of sufficientarianism, and I have provided some reasons in support of it. I have also argued that the most pressing objections against sufficientarianism are unsuccessful when aimed at value-satiability sufficientarianism, because they falsely come to assume insatiability of value in the numerical counterexamples they give. Thus, I have argued, these objections are expressions of what I termed, *the numbers fallacy*. This is not decisive evidence for sufficientarianism, and one could have further reasons to question the prospect of even value-satiability sufficientarianism, but I take it that my argument in general has proven sufficientarianism more difficult to refute than it is commonly being credited for.⁴⁸

¹ Carina Fourie & Annette Rid (eds.) *What is Enough? Sufficiency, Justice, and Health* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

² Carsten Jensen & Kees Van Kersbergen *The Politics of Inequality* (Houndsmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

³ Joseph Raz *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); Harry Frankfurt 'Equality as a moral ideal', *Ethics* 98 (1987), p. 21-43; *On Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Roger Crisp 'Equality, priority, and compassion', *Ethics* 113 (2003), p. 745-63; Yitzhak Benbaji 'The doctrine of sufficiency: A defense', *Utilitas* 17 (2005), p. 310-32; 'Sufficiency or priority?', *European Journal of Philosophy* 14 (2006), p. 327-48; Robert Huseby 'Sufficiency: Restated and defended', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18 (2010), p. 178-97; David V. Axelsen & Lasse Nielsen 'Sufficiency as Freedom From Duress', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 23 (2015), p. 406-26.

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- ⁴ Paula Casal ‘Why sufficiency is not enough’, *Ethics* 117 (2007), p. 296-326.
- ⁵ Liam Shields ‘The prospects for sufficientarianism’, *Utilitas* 14 (2012), p. 101-117; *Just Enough: Sufficiency as a Demand of Justice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).
- ⁶ Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, p. 235.
- ⁷ Crisp, ‘Equality, priority, and compassion’, p. 757.
- ⁸ This interpretation finds support in the need for Crisp to distinguish between the compassion principle and the sufficiency principle. See Crisp, ‘Equality, priority, and compassion’.
- ⁹ Huseby, ‘Sufficiency: Restated and defended’; Benbaji, ‘The doctrine of sufficiency: A defense’.
- ¹⁰ Shields, *Just Enough*, p. 36-37
- ¹¹ Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, p. 242
- ¹² Shelly Kagan ‘The structure of normative ethics’, *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 (1992), p. 223-42.
- ¹³ David Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen ‘Essentially enough: Elements of a plausible account of sufficientarianism’, Carina Fourie & Annette Rid (eds.) *What is Enough? Sufficiency, Justice, and Health* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- ¹⁵ Raz, *Morality of Freedom*, p. 280.
- ¹⁶ Crisp, ‘Equality, priority, and compassion’, p. 758. The same applies for Benbaji, ‘The doctrine of sufficiency: A defense’.
- ¹⁷ Epicurus, *Leading Doctrines*, §18-21, London: Penguin Classics (2012). See also Gisela Striker ‘Ataraxia: Happiness as tranquility’, *The Monist* 73 (1993), p. 97-110.
- ¹⁸ Huseby ‘Sufficiency: Restated and defended’.
- ¹⁹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by A.L. Macfie and D.D. Raphael (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982 [1759]), p. 150.
- ²⁰ Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- ²¹ Raz, *Morality of Freedom*.
- ²² Axelsen and Nielsen ‘Sufficiency as freedom from duress’.
- ²³ Nussbaum ‘Women and human development’, at p. 78-80.

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- ²⁴ Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Ian Carter, 'The independent value of freedom', *Ethics* 105 (1995): 819-845. Lasse Nielsen, 'Sufficiency grounded as sufficiently free: A reply to Shlomi Segall', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33 (2016).
- ²⁵ Thomas Scanlon, 'Preference and Urgency', *The Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 655-669
- ²⁶ For a position that grounds health needs on Scanlon's criterion, see Norman Daniels, *Just Health* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press).
- ²⁷ Raz, *Morality of Freedom*; Nielsen 'Sufficiency grounded as sufficiently free'.
- ²⁸ Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*;
- ²⁹ Michael Blake 'Distributive justice, state coercion, and autonomy', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 30 (2002), p. 257-96.
- ³⁰ Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, p.78-80.
- ³¹ Lasse Nielsen & David V. Axelsen, 'Capabilitarian Sufficiency: Capabilities and Social Justice', *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 18 (2017): 46-59. See also Rutger Claassen, *Capabilities in a Just Society: A Theory of Navigational Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018).
- ³² Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, p. 80.
- ³³ Nielsen and Axelsen, 'Capabilitarian Sufficiency'.
- ³⁴ See Larry Temkin 'Equality, priority or what?', *Economics and Philosophy* 19 (2003), p. 61-87; 'Equality as comparative fairness', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 34 (2017), p. 43-60; Carl Knight 'Abandoning the abandonment objection: Luck egalitarian arguments for public insurance', *Res Publica* 21 (2015), p. 119-135.
- ³⁵ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), chapter 2.
- ³⁶ Derek Parfit 'Equality or priority?', *Ratio* 10 (1997), p. 202-221.
- ³⁷ Temkin 'Equality, priority or what?'; Brown 'Priority or sufficiency ... or both?'; Casal 'Why sufficiency is not enough'; Dorsey 'Equality-tempered prioritarianism'; Knight 'Abandoning the abandonment objection'; Segall 'What is the point of sufficiency?'.
- ³⁸ Knight 'Abandoning the abandonment objection'.
- ³⁹ Shields, *Just Enough*, chapter 2.
- ⁴⁰ Casal 'Why sufficiency is not enough'.

⁴¹ Parfit ‘Equality or priority?’.

⁴² Benbaji ‘The doctrine of sufficiency’; ‘Sufficiency or priority?’; Huseby ‘Sufficiency: Restated and defended’; Axelsen and Nielsen ‘Sufficiency as freedom from duress’.

⁴³ Shields, *Just Enough*, chapter 2.

⁴⁴ Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* 78-80.

⁴⁵ Karl Widerquist, ‘How the sufficiency minimum becomes a social maximum’, *Utilitas* 22 (2010), p. 474-480.

⁴⁶ See David Estlund, ‘Utopophobia’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24 (2014), p. 113-134.

⁴⁷ Daniels, *Just Health*.

⁴⁸ This paper has benefitted a great deal from reviewer and editor comments for which I am grateful. For very useful comments on earlier drafts of it, I owe special thanks to ...