What is our Real Concern with Real Inequality?

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Abstract     In this article, I offer an account of when and why inequality is problematic. I build this account upon the central elements of the sufficiency view—that justice is concerned with eliminating absolute deficiencies rather than comparative inequalities. The account that I develop here, is concerned with an inequality if, and only if, it involves an instance of absolute deficiency; either material or social. I then conduct an analysis of suggested reasons to care about inequality identified in recent studies of the politics of inequality, and I argue that the sufficiency account can explain the reasons that empiricists give for their concern with inequality. Upon that analysis, I conclude that we have strong reasons to be concerned with inequalities, but that these reasons stem from our acceptance of the sufficiency view rather than from an intrinsic worry with inequality.
Introduction

Why be concerned about inequality? Much recent theorizing and empirical investigation of the politics and social dynamics of inequality has either failed to successfully address or answer this question. Why is it that we consider more inequality bad and less inequality good? On this question, contemporary inequality scholars find themselves in somewhat of a dilemma. On the one hand, it seems that our concern with inequalities does not stem from relative differences per se, but is derived rather from our moral disturbance with underlying poverty (Feldstein 1999). But on the other hand, we often find ourselves troubled by significant inequalities even in the absence of any absolute poverty (Atkinson 2015; Kenworthy 2008). Consequently, scholars of political inequality are on shaky ground when it comes to the explaining of their theoretical grounds for concern with inequality, and the standard move is to set aside the normative part of this question and to justify the concern with inequality merely on the negative consequences of large economic inequalities for society as a whole (Jensen and Van Kersbergen 2016; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Kenworthy 2008). Despite that this might well be enough to justify political action to reduce inequality this standard move is theoretically inadequate. It does not explain, on a consistent normative or empirical account, our strong concern with inequality.

This article offers a way out of this dilemma for scholars of inequality. It bridges normative political theorizing and empirically informed perspectives on political inequality and thereby offers a coherent account of why we care about inequality. More specifically, it elaborates a political aspiring version of the sufficiency view—indebted to the theorizing of Harry Frankfurt (1987; 2015) and Roger Crisp (2003)—and applies this view to the set of reasons given in the empirical literature to oppose inequality. Thus, importantly, it is not the aim of this article to argue that inequalities are not morally problematic, or to argue that our political
struggle for distributive equality is beyond the scope of justice—which is often the most reasonable interpretation of so-called sufficientarian theories. Rather, the aim here is to offer an account that explains why and when we have strong reasons to be concerned with inequality and to rectify its causes. The aim, in a nutshell, is not to question the value of distributive equality but rather to strengthen its theoretical justification.

The sufficiency view developed here opposes inequality by appeal to the intrinsic normative importance of eliminating absolute deficiencies. On this view, inequalities are only problematic when they express a relation of absolute insufficiency. More specifically, inequalities are intrinsically normatively problematic if, and only if, they entail an instance of absolute and relevant deficiency and instrumentally normatively problematic if, and only if, they bring along or make worse absolute and relevant deficiencies. This view not only informs our theorizing about the politics of inequality but also commits to a particular political account of which inequalities we ought to rectify and which inequalities are beyond the scope of any political community’s domain for enforceable political regulation. Thus, the argument of this article will have significant political implications.

**Sufficientarianism**

The recent development within normative political theory has brought about an arising trend to diverge from the central belief of so-called intrinsic or telic egalitarianism—that outcome equality is in itself normatively valuable (Temkin 2003). One promising alternative that has gained some attention is the sufficiency view, most notably developed in reference to Harry Frankfurt’s statement that “what is important from the point of view of morality is not that everyone should have the same but that each should have enough” (1987; 2015: 7). On the basis
of this intuition, Frankfurt formulated what he called “the doctrine of sufficiency”, which manifested his status as the founding father of the sufficiency view. More recently, the view has been further developed by Roger Crisp, who anchored the sufficiency principle in the moral emotional response of compassion, essentially inspired by the moral philosophy of philosophers such as David Hume and Adam Smith. Crisp’s view implies that sufficiency is achieved at that particular point when compassion for the individual in question is no longer called for, also called “the compassion principle” (Crisp 2003).

Other developments of the central idea of the sufficiency view have emphasized the strong negative expressions of the sufficiency view entailed in the implied opposition against insufficiency. The line of reasoning is that if justice is concerned with securing enough for everyone instead of the same for everyone, then our political effort should be targeted at eliminating insufficiency rather than seeking perfect equality. This negative expression of the general sufficientarian intuition is emphasized in Joseph Raz’s popular remark that our political concern should not be with aiming for equality of amounts of some goods or state of affairs but with “the hunger of the hungry, the need of the needy, the suffering of the ill, and so on” (1986, 240). It is echoed by very influential theorists such as Martha Nussbaum in her well-known development of a thick-vague theory of universal human entitlements under the conception that there is “[…] a tragic aspect to any choice in which citizens are pushed below the threshold in one of the central areas” (2000, 81).

Much debate has followed these pioneering philosophical statements, and theoretical studies engaging with the sufficiency view is in general gaining terrain in the political theory
Much of this debate is concerned with very specific, technical, and philosophical improvements of the sufficiency view to render it more theoretically sound and intuitively plausible as an ideal-theory principle of distributive justice. I am largely sympathetic to that, but it is not my purpose here. Rather, here, I have the more modest purpose of using the sufficiency view as a background normative theory for grounding our beliefs about what is problematic about inequality. Thus, I can settle for a more generic and ecumenical version of the sufficiency view emphasizing its strong negative element of eliminating insufficiencies.

The ecumenical sufficiency view: *Absolute relevant deficiencies ought to be eliminated (or alternatively, minimized), regardless of whether inequality will increase as a result.*

As a normative principle, the ecumenical sufficiency view needs some clarifying remarks. First, the formulation of the principle is negative because the sufficiency view, in its strongest formulations, is concerned with eliminating injustice rather than with designing and pursuing a specific positive ideal of perfect just distribution. Thus, the principle implies, we need not adopt a specific account of perfect distributive justice in order to be able to identify and criticize particular instances of relevant deficiencies. This is no theoretical embarrassment of the view. Rather, it is both a philosophical strength—grounding the view more strongly in firm normative,

1 See Yitzhak Benbaji (2005; 2006), Robert Huseby (2010), Liam Shields (2012; 2016), David V. Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen (2015), Carl Knight (2015), and Shlomi Segall (2016). See also Carina Fourie and Annette Rid (2016) for a recent collection of views developed to apply the sufficiency view to health and health care. For a very useful collection of works elaborating and discussing the sufficiency view, see Liam Shields’ sufficientarian bibliography on his personal webpage: http://liamshields.com/teaching-and-study-materials/.
non-ideal theory (Sen 2009, 410; Wolff 2015a)—and a theoretical improvement of the applicability of the view as a scientific tool or framework for normative analysis of real-world political inequality (Anderson 2010, 6).

Second, the principle in itself is not committed to a specific account of absolute relevant deficiencies but must be supplemented by such an account. In principle, then, a sufficientarian political theory can be unfolded in all colors of well-being theory—such as welfarism (Huseby 2010), resourcism (Shue 1996), and capabilitarianism (Nussbaum 2000). What all these versions can agree on is that for a specific deficit to be a concern of justice, it must be absolute. That is, it cannot only be a comparative deficit—merely a relative shortfall from what others have—but must, in an absolute sense, be less than what a person needs. This is of course often difficult to say in practice, but the distinction is theoretically grounded and of central importance to the sufficiency view. To employ Roger Crisp’s absurd but well-known Beverly Hills Case (2003) as a case in point, all sufficiency theories can agree that having only access to Lafite 1982 wines when others have access to the slightly more extravagant Latour 1982 is by no means an absolute deficit, although it is in some sense an instance of inequality. The absurdity of the example aside, the case nicely captures the core tenet of the ecumenical sufficiency view. Justice is concerned with eliminating absolute deficiencies, not with levelling arbitrary comparative differences in welfare, resources or opportunities.

The sufficiency view on inequality

From the above formulation of the ecumenical sufficiency view and with the two above clarifications I mind, we can move on to address the issue of what is normatively problematic about inequality from the perspective of the sufficiency view. The ecumenical sufficiency view
implies that there must exist, at least theoretically, some absolute threshold representing the
relevant point of elimination of deficiency such that justice is immediately disturbed by people
being located below that level, whereas inequalities above that level are irrelevant to justice.
Thus, we can arrive at another, related normative principle, which commits the sufficiency view
on a specific evaluative account of unjust inequalities.

The sufficiency view on inequality: An inequality is unjust if, and only if, it involves a
relevant absolute deficiency from a threshold level of some good or value above which
inequalities are irrelevant to justice.

This view on inequality importantly stresses the central egalitarian-critical element of sufficiency
theory—that it is not inequalities per se but insufficiencies that drive our reasons for normative
disturbance. It follows that not all inequalities are politically problematic. This is already an
intuitively appealing conclusion that counts to the advantage of sufficientarianism over
egalitarianism as it avoids implausible implications such as having moral reasons to level
everyone down to the worst-off level of well-being for the sake of securing equality (Parfit
1997), but it seems that we can say more about how insufficiencies relate to inequalities.

There are at least three ways in which an inequality can involve a relevant absolute
deficiency. First, an inequality between two groups of people can be within insufficiency if both
the better-off and the worse-off group are below the relevant threshold. This would be the case,
for example, in the expression of the difference in the Human Development Index Value of
Sierra Leone (0.413) and that of Benin (0.480), assuming quite plausibly that both of these
numbers are below what we consider the relevant threshold. The Human Development Index
(HDI) is a summary measure (from 0 to 1) of the average achievement in key development factors including literacy, life expectancy, and GDP, and thus, whatever point on the HDI scale would serve to identify the relevant threshold, it seems fair to assume that both Sierra Leone’s 0.413 and Benin’s 0.480 are below that level, whereas, for example, Denmark’s 0.923 is fairly high above that level. On that assumption, the distance between Sierra Leone and Benin in terms of HDI represents an inequality within insufficiency. This inequality captures the critical urgency in not only being below a critical point of well-being but being significantly worse off than others who are likewise below a critical point of well-being. Thus, quite obviously, it is not the inequality in the example per se that drives the normative frustration but the relevant insufficiency of some centrally important value. In this case, that value is captured by the underlying score in HDI and coupled with the signal of urgency of that insufficiency stemming from the significant distance between the worse-off and the better-off group, which are under the same threshold of absolute deficiency. In other words, what is special about the inequality within insufficiency is the alarming signal in some group faring so badly that another salient group can do significantly better while still being below the level constituting a good enough level.

Second, an inequality between two groups can be an expression of insufficiency if the difference between the two cuts across the relevant threshold on a specific relevant value measure. That is the case in the instance of the difference in the Human Development Index Value between Sierra Leone (0.413) and Denmark (0.923). On the assumption that the relevant threshold in terms of HDI is between these two scores, the difference between Denmark and Sierra Leone thus represents an “inequality of insufficiency”. According to the ecumenical sufficiency view, this inequality is normatively problematic because of its cutting across the absolute threshold, whereas inequalities above this threshold are unproblematic (at least in
themselves). It follows that we have strong normative political reasons to work against the inequality between Sierra Leone and Denmark, whereas we could ignore the difference in HDI between Denmark (0.923) and, say, Norway (0.944) even though this difference represents a significant inequality.

These two expressions of relevant deficiencies—the inequality within insufficiency and the inequality of insufficiency—provide us with two reasons based on the ecumenical sufficiency view for why we object to inequality. What these reasons have in common is that they imply that it is not the inequality in itself that carries the normative frustration but the fact that these inequalities involve that someone is below a relevant absolute threshold. In other words, we object to the inequalities on sufficientarian, not egalitarian, grounds.

But, then, what about relatively high-level inequalities that do not involve anyone being below any relevant threshold of absolute well-being? What about inequalities between upper- and middle-class employees in West European countries in which every employee fares decently well in terms of income? Or what about the significant differential treatment of men and women on the US labor market? It seems, initially, that the sufficiency view, however ecumenical, is quite ineffective in dealing with these sorts of inequalities, although they seem so harshly politically problematic.

Larry Temkin forcefully puts forward this worry in his objection to the sufficiency view based on discrimination (Temkin 2003, 65–6):

Suppose, for example, that two people with “plenty” both applied for a job. Would it not matter if we discriminated against one of them on the basis of his race or religion? Surely it matters. Even if the person discriminated against is not suffering or needy, and would
have a perfectly fulfilling life whatever we do, discriminating against him on the basis of
race or religion would be unjust and unfair, and we ought not to do it. To be sure, we
might grant that there would be additional reasons of compassion to condemn harmful
discrimination against people who were suffering or needy, but the injustice of
discrimination does not disappear just because someone is “sufficiently” well off.

So, it seems that we need much more than what is provided by the ecumenical sufficiency view
in order to ground and explain our normative political dissatisfaction with inequality, which is
clearly often related to unequal standing on some social dimension.

Recently, sufficientarians have investigated the impact of this social dimension and
elaborated on the potential of the sufficiency view to deal with the problem it raises for them.
Most notably, they suggest that some instances of social inequalities—such as the ones revolving
around discrimination as exemplified by Temkin—is not just an inequality above the relevant
threshold on some singular measure of well-being but is another and distinct type of inequality
involving a relevant absolute deficiency of its own kind. In other words, the inequality captured
by an act of discrimination or a discriminative norm is not just an above-threshold difference in
well-being—as the difference in HDI between Denmark and Norway is an above-threshold
difference on the same scale to which we oppose the inequality between Denmark and Sierra
Leone. Rather, such an expression of inferior social standing involves a distinct kind of,
particularly social, deficiency. This deficiency is characterized as either “relational” in that it
expresses a type of deficiency founded in inferior treatment or lack of respect or as “positional”
in that the absolute value of the good in question depends on the possessor’s relative standing on
that good compared to others (Anderson 1999; Scheffler 2003; Wolff 2015a; Axelsen and Nielsen 2015).

This distinctive type of social deficiency is one form a relevant absolute deficiency may take. Therefore, it expresses an alternative way—to forms of absolute deprivation—that a person can be insufficiently well off. It is, however, importantly different from relative deprivation as it is not set off by people having relatively less material resources than others but only by people being absolutely worse-off than others on a social dimension. Quite often, however, relative deprivation will automatically coincide with inferior social treatment and thus effectively result in absolute social deficiencies (Wolff 2015b).

This gives rise to another distinctive way that inequalities can be objectionable on grounds of the ecumenical sufficiency view. I shall term these inequalities with social insufficiency, emphasizing that such inequalities bring along an adhesive social deficiency, such as discrimination, social exclusion, oppression, or stigmatization, although they do not involve anyone being below a relevant absolute threshold of material resources or needs (Wolff 2015b; Young 1990, 42; Anderson 2010, 48). That is, where “inequalities within insufficiency” and “inequality of insufficiency” involve threshold-bound deficiencies because they are objectionable in direct relation to one specific singular threshold point, “inequalities with social insufficiency” are not bound to any specific threshold. Rather, they express themselves in a social arena on the basis of societal norms and informal institutions. Hence, we can say that they involve social norm-bound deficiencies.

The elaboration of the ecumenical sufficiency view and its relation to inequality leads on to this classification of reasons for opposing inequalities.
### Table 1. Inequality, sufficiency, and deficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inequality</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Relation to insufficiency</th>
<th>Type of deficiency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone-Denmark</td>
<td>0.413-0.923 HDI</td>
<td>Of</td>
<td>Threshold-bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone-Benin</td>
<td>0.413-0.480 HDI</td>
<td>Within</td>
<td>Threshold-bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark-Norway</td>
<td>0.923-0.944 HDI</td>
<td>Above</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender inequality</td>
<td>Discriminative norm</td>
<td>With social</td>
<td>Social norm-bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative poverty</td>
<td>Imbalanced status</td>
<td>With social</td>
<td>Social norm-bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wage variations</td>
<td>Income inequality</td>
<td>Beyond</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, we can sum up the sufficiency view on inequality in the following steps. (i) An inequality is unjust if, and only if, it involves a relevant absolute deficiency. (ii) A relevant absolute deficiency can be *threshold-bound* if it involves someone being below a critical absolute threshold, as in terms of HDI, or it can be *social norm-bound* if it involves someone being treated as inferior or with lack of respect, as in cases of discrimination. (iii) Threshold-bound deficiencies can be seen in inequalities of insufficiency, in which the inequality in question crosses the relevant threshold, or in inequalities *within* insufficiency, in which both parts are located below the relevant threshold, in which case the inequality is a sign of immense urgency. (IV) Social norm-bound deficiencies are identified in inequalities *with social* insufficiency as an attachment to material inequalities that are not (necessarily) in themselves problematic but that give rise to inferior or disrespectful treatment of some group or agent. The following section provides an analysis of suggested reasons to care about inequality from recent inequality studies using the sufficiency view on inequality as a normative theoretical framework.
Reasons for concern about inequality

This section offers an analysis from within the framework of the sufficiency view on inequality of reasons given in the literature to oppose inequality. This analysis holds novelty in two separate forms. First, it provides the missing link between empirical inequality studies and normative political theory and, hence, offers inequality scholars a coherent normative framework explaining why we care about inequalities. Second, as it is firmly based in normative non-ideal political theory, it provides a new perspective on real-world political inequality. That is, where classical ideal-theoretical political theory begins with a conception of a perfect state of justice or equality—such as John Rawls’ canonical Theory of Justice (Rawls 1999) or so-called Luck Egalitarians’ ideal of responsibility-sensitive equality (Lippert-Rasmussen 2016)—and therefrom judges real-world inequalities on the basis of their deviation from that ideal state, the sufficiency view on inequality goes the other way around. It goes directly to the instance of inequality in question and, informed by the sufficiency view, evaluates what is normatively worrisome about them. In this way, it lends much from Elizabeth Anderson’s diagnostic theoretical methodology, which, as she describes, “begins with a diagnosis of the problems and complaints of our society and investigates how to overcome these problems” (Anderson 2010, 6). The same non-ideal diagnostic approach is also implicit in Amartya Sen’s political theory (Sen 2009, 410), whereas it has more recently been explicitly emphasized by Jonathan Wolff (2015).

Poverty, not inequality

One important question that remains unsettled in political economics is whether we should be concerned with inequality or poverty; that is, whether it is inequality “in and of itself” that we find normatively problematic, or rather, the deprivation that is sometimes underlying the
inequality. Much recent economic and social theory concerns inequality (Atkinson 2015), but when we dig below the surface of our opposition against inequality, is it really caused by our dissatisfaction with poverty? Highly esteemed economists, most notably Martin Feldstein, have defended the view that poverty, not inequality should be our main political concern (Atkinson 2015, 23; Feldstein 2005). Elsewhere, Feldstein makes the same argument using a thought experiment of a magic bird (in fact, much in line with ideal-theory philosophical reasoning) that provides every subscriber of the journal Public Interest with a monetary bonus of $1000 (Feldstein 1999). As Feldstein has wisely seen, if we were concerned with inequality, we would be bound to consider that bonus morally problematic, but that seems counterintuitive. Much in tune with Rawls’ difference principle and the derivative prioritarianism of Derek Parfit (1997), Feldstein claims that this $1000 bonus, being an economic Pareto improvement under the given circumstances, although if arbitrarily given and undeserved, cannot be morally suspect.

This intuition has wide political attraction. It allows for a very common economic assumption derived from the Pareto principle that an outcome that is better for some but worse for no one is effectively a dominant improvement from status quo and, hence, cannot be morally suspect. This sits well with our strong political reasons to secure economic growth and, therefore, not to promote perfect equality—regardless how strongly ideal-theory might give us reason to (Temkin 2003)—typically based on economic incentives and dynamics. As Atkinson notes to begin his first chapter in Inequality: What can be done? (2015), his aim is not for perfect equality but a reduction of inequality. “Indeed”, he claims, “certain differences in economic rewards may be quite justifiable. Rather, the goal is to reduce inequality below its current level, in the belief that the present level of inequality is excessive” (2015, 9).
The same is echoed by Lane Kenworthy in his introductory remarks to *Jobs with Equality* (2008). “Imagine”, he asks us, “a society in which the social product is divided into an equal consumption allowance for each citizen. If the population were 10 million, the effective marginal tax rate on additional income would be 99.99999 percent, and an average earner who abandoned paid employment would reduce the value of her own consumption share by a mere 0.00001 percent. Plainly, the incentive to opt out of employment would be quite strong” (2008, 13).

As rightly pointed out by Kenworthy and Atkinson in their introducing reflections, we are not in favor of a state of perfect equality, and hence, nor are we against inequality *per se*. Many instances of increased inequalities should therefore not be deemed normatively worrisome, and they cannot, therefore, be eligible for concerns based on a principle of justice. Thus, and in line with Feldstein’s intuitive reaction to the magic bird thought experiment, it seems that although we are always normatively disturbed by real-world poverty, we do allow real-world inequality, and for fairly good reasons. In consequence, this gives us strong reason to be concerned with inequality when it coincides with underlying poverty while not being disturbed about inequality “in and of itself”.

This asymmetry between concerns of inequality and concerns of poverty provides a hardball for egalitarian reasoning but sits well with the sufficiency view on inequality. The sufficiency view on inequality is ready to accept economic inequality in so far as it does not involve absolute deficiencies of any sort. As exemplified by the inequality between Denmark and Norway in their performance on the Human Development Index (HDI), there is room for above threshold differences, and inequalities grounded in those should be deemed outside the scope of justice. But, what this implies derivatively is that we should, on the other hand, acknowledge the immediate urgency of inequalities of *of* insufficiency and *within* insufficiency, in which actual
forms of poverty do occur, and that we need political action to target those urgent instances of injustice. This must serve a first purpose of a decent social policy. The sufficiency view on inequality does not, therefore, justify right-wing libertarian neglect of the issue of social inequality. What it implies is not that inequality is unproblematic and does not call for political rectification but, rather, that we must take urgent political action to eliminate inequalities of and within insufficiency and leave aside irrelevant relative differences between people at high levels of wealth and welfare.

But, the appeal to the poverty over inequality asymmetry reason is not uncontested. However much we might agree with the Pareto-driven intuition above, we still seem to have a very strong inclination to oppose inequalities even at very high levels of wealth and welfare. Most highly developed welfare societies today are hugely concerned about inequality, which seems to suggest that there are some problematic aspects related to that. The same is made clear by Lane Kenworthy’s counterfactual distributional scheme, in which we are asked to choose which of the following four different societies A, B, C, and D we prefer on normative grounds.

Table 2. Income distributions in four hypothetical societies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household income</th>
<th>Average Income</th>
<th>Gini Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor Household</td>
<td>Middle Household</td>
<td>Rich Household</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society A</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society B</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society C</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As we can see, the middle household is the same in all societies, so the median income must be held somewhat constant. What is most interesting for my purpose here is that from A to C to D, there are three relevant developments. First, absolute poverty is lowered as the poor are experiencing increased income. Second, the average income is increased, mostly from C to D, because the rich have a serious increase in income. Third, as a direct result of the enormous economic benefit given to the rich, inequality is significantly increased—in Society D the Gini coefficient is .66 which is higher than in, for example, Sierra Leone.

Thus, both in terms of poverty reduction and in terms of average income, Society D is dominantly better than the other societies, and this only comes at the expense of higher inequality. So, the important normative question is whether we therefore prefer Society D. Kenworthy’s suggestion is that we should not. “The point of this exercise”, he says, “is to suggest that there is reason to be concerned about both poverty and inequality” (2008, 23). Upon this exercise, Kenworthy concludes that we have strong reasons to be concerned with inequality “in and of itself”. His reasons for that conclusion are various (and unfortunately rather speculative) but includes that people care about relative stand rather than absolute level of income and that high inequality has a negative effect on other societal aspects, such as social mobility and societal status. If he is right, this would count against the sufficiency view and in favor of egalitarian reasoning. Importantly, however, none of these reasons necessarily supports the conclusion that inequality is problematic “in and of itself”. Rather, it informs us that large inequality is politically alarming for us. What it clearly implies is that large economic inequality
entails a signal of something normatively worrisome, but it need not be the case that it is the inequality as such that is problematic. What seems to be the case empirically is that large inequality is directly related to social deficiency. In other words, large inequalities result in absolute deficiencies of a social kind. This leads us to consider the connection between material inequality and social insufficiency.

Inequality and social insufficiency

In a recently updated study, Danny Dorling draws the conclusion that social inequality has given rise, through social dynamics, to new forms of social harms such as elitism, social exclusion, prejudice, greed, and despair (Dorling 2015, 20). All these effects are problematic because they revolve around the same imbalance in societal status. This sits well with a recent trend in the reasoning of inequality studies. In social and political studies of inequality, there has been a recent tendency to set aside the question of whether or not inequality, in isolation, is our main political concern and instead focus on the grave negative effects of inequalities on different instantiations of societal status. That is, regardless of whether or not there is anything intrinsically bad about unequal outcomes, large income inequalities have grave negative social consequences. This justification is perfectly emphasized in quite recent work on the matter of inequality, in which agnosticism about the moral badness of inequality leads inequality scholars to oppose economic inequality on grounds of its unfortunate derived social impact (Jensen and Van Kersbergen 2016; Picavet 2013). This line of reasoning builds on a foundation that has gained significant support from the comprehensive studies of previous decades on the complex integration of wealth inequality with other non-wealth forms of deficiencies in, for example,
health (Marmot 2004; 2005; Marmot and Wilkinson 1999), social mobility (Corak 2013), and other social aspects (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010, 20).

And almost as a hitherto culmination of this paradigm, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett published their very influential book, *The Spirit Level* (2010), which clearly serves to ascertain the instrumental disvalue of material inequality on societal status. Through skilful and comprehensive statistical analysis of the integrated relationships surrounding wealth inequality such as those mentioned above, Wilkinson and Pickett conclude that “[t]he scale of income differences has a powerful effect on how we relate to each other” (2009, 4–5). This conclusion emphasizes the important influence that wealth inequalities have over social relations and therefore captures a large part of the relevant instrumental reasons for opposing economic inequality. Wilkinson and Pickett’s conclusion has not gone without criticism (Snowdon 2010; Saunders 2010). That is, it is still a contestable issue exactly how bad inequality is for our health, social mobility, societal cohesion, and so on. But, importantly, the overall pattern of the instrumental reasoning for why we care about inequality is solid. The overall Wilkinson-Pickett conclusion, that economic inequality affects how we relate to each other, has become a commonsensical social scientific truth and has been widely accepted to serve common ground for scholars of social inequality (Atkinson 2015, 11; Dorling 2015, 19; Jensen and Van Kersbergen 2016; Kenworthy 2008, 3–6).

Up until now, this widely shared conception of why we are concerned with inequality has been placed within a broadly defined strand of egalitarian reasoning. But as is apparent, it gains much explanatory force when informed by the sufficiency view on inequality. Recall that the sufficiency view explains our normative dissatisfaction with material differences if these represent inequalities *with* social insufficiencies—as with discriminatory norms, social
exclusion, or imbalance in social status. This is so, not because the inequality is bad “in and of itself”, but because the effect of that particular inequality places a group of people below an absolute threshold in terms of social value. In other words, it gives rise to an immanent social norm-bound deficiency hidden behind the structure of material inequality. This serves as the normative basis on which we can deem such inequalities disturbing and problematic. It leads to absolute social deficiencies facilitating a state of insufficient individual freedom or autonomy (Raz 1986). Or, put differently, it leaves people below a relevant threshold on a social dimension (Nussbaum 2000, 78-81). What Wilkinson and Pickett describe as unacceptable social relations, or unacceptable ways to “relate to each other”, and what Dorling terms “social evils” (Dorling 2015, 20) is captured by the sufficiency view on inequality as inequalities with social insufficiencies. This gives us a justice-based reason to be concerned with large economic inequalities, even at very high levels of development and material wealth, based on their coincidental but strong relationship with absolute deficiencies in the social sphere.

*Equal opportunity*

However, there is a widely shared strand of reasoning behind our opposition to inequality yet to be explained. Often, inequalities are perceived as problematic on the base of opportunity-catering reasoning. This reasoning is most famously captured in the ideal of equality of opportunity or the expression of “leveling the playing field”, following the important work of philosophers such as John Roemer (1998) and Richard Arneson (1989), but it can also be expressed in terms of Amartya Sen’s framework of functioning capabilities (1985; 1992). Most recently, the ideal of equal opportunity has been fleshed out by Joseph Fishkin to imply a political obligation to
eliminate central “bottlenecks” in society that gravely limits people’s opportunities (Fishkin 2014: 146).

At first sight, it may appear that the opportunity-catering reasoning would not necessarily object to economic inequality, since it implies that inequalities in outcome are permissible if resulting from an equal opportunity space. Thus, it seems uncertain whether opportunity-catering reasoning about inequality poses a theoretical threat to the sufficiency view on inequality. But it seems to do so in two separate ways. First, it gives us reasons to oppose economic inequalities when they are not stemming from an outset entailing equality of opportunity and even when everyone is at a high level of wellbeing. Adding to this an empirical claim, which is incontestable, that the current state of affairs is not one of equal opportunity, we can conclude that opportunity-catering reasoning will oppose large inequality. This is an ex-post use of the opportunity-catering reasoning. It says that inequalities are permissible when the playing field is levelled, but since this is in fact not the case, we have opportunity-catering reasons to oppose the current state of affairs.

There is another parallel but ex-ante way of using the opportunity-catering reasoning to be concerned about high-level inequality. This is based in forward-looking fairness. It says that since today’s distribution of wealth determines tomorrow’s playing field, we should object to economic inequalities (even at high levels) because they reproduce opportunity inequality. A recent development in the empirical literature on inequality and the welfare state demonstrates that future opportunity and life prospects are to a significant degree determined already in very early childhood (Heckman and Mosso 2014; Esping-Andersen 2015). This conclusion gains further support through insights from the child-development literature, which illustrates that a child’s chances of educational success is significantly influenced by cognitive and social skills.
acquired in preschool years (Weisberg et al. 2013; Weisberg et al. 2015; Lindsey and Colwell 2003). Moreover, it is even further strengthened by empirical studies showing that children’s socioeconomic background determines educational performance through school preparation throughout school years (Smeeding 2013, 14). Taken together, this implies that even if the inequalities in wealth that our current state of affairs entails were the result of equality of opportunity at the outset, we would have opportunity-catering reasons to oppose large wealth inequalities because of its impact on the opportunity set for the future generation.

How does the sufficiency view on inequality respond to the equality of opportunity strand of reasoning? It is evident that the opportunity-catering reasons in appeal to values such as fairness are unlikely to be compatible with the sufficiency view. Why should we care about unequal opportunity, on the sufficiency account, if no material or social deficiency is present? Here, the sufficientarian must swim against the tide and insist that just as there is nothing objectionable about inequality “in and of itself”, there is, in principle, nothing normatively problematic about differences in people’s opportunities. But on further reflection, it is hard to see why this is necessarily counterintuitive. Much of the normative explanatory force behind the appeal to reasons of equal opportunity relates to specific social goods—such as education, employment, and political influence—which are inevitably intertwined with instances of imbalanced societal status and, thus, highly vulnerable to social norm-bound deficiencies. If this was not the case—if, for example, education had no spill over to societal status value, such as relative poverty or social class inferiority—it would seem peculiar to worry about people facing unequal educational opportunities. It would make the underlying base for claims of fairness problematically arbitrary. In consequence, the sufficiency view on inequality explains when and why we should object to inequality also if it is expressed in terms of unequal opportunity.
Since this point relies on the specifics of the relationship between absolute insufficiency and particular inequalities (of opportunity), and since this relationship is evidently quite complex, it is important to emphasize that this is no argument against the ideal of equal opportunity. In fact, it might be taken to strengthen the justification of this ideal. What my argument implies is not that we have no good reasons to care for and protect equality of opportunity, but rather that these reasons are sufficientarian rather than egalitarian. Equal opportunity is important not because opportunities need to equal, but because unequal opportunity very often coincide with social insufficiency. This implication is sometimes acknowledged within the scope of equal opportunity theory. In instance, Amartya Sen’s capability approach is often interpreted, and rightly so, as a specific version of an equal opportunity ideal. But Sen’s normative grounds for the protection of equality of opportunity, as well as distributive material equality, bases on an underlying normative concern with absolute deprivation in the space of capability (Sen 1992: 115). Thus, essentially, what drives Sen’s work is sufficiency of capability rather than equality of opportunity. This is of course no embarrassment for Sen—or for equality of opportunity in general—but it serves to bolster our belief in the sufficiency view as explanatory for our general opposition with political inequality.

Why we (really) care about inequality

I can sum up the above analysis in the following captions of separate reasons to be concerned with inequality. First, poverty is often an underlying reason to be concerned with inequality because poverty represents a circumstance under which people are living insufficiently good lives. Second, inequality often coincides with imbalanced social relations, which is normatively problematic on its own terms because imbalanced social relations facilitate social
circumstances—such as discrimination, social exclusion, oppression, and so on—under which people are living insufficiently good lives. Third, there are so far no adequately good reasons for being concerned with inequality in and of itself. This result is well explained by the sufficiency view on inequality. We can thus conclude the following:

i) There is no normatively grounded reason to be concerned with inequality in and of itself.

ii) Inequality is normatively problematic only if,
   a. it involves some sort of absolute threshold-bound deficiency—e.g. in terms of poverty. Or if,
   b. it coincides with some sort of social norm-bound deficiency—e.g. discrimination, social exclusion, oppression, or other forms of imbalance in societal status.

**Conclusion**

Should we stop worrying about inequality? Is working against social inequality beyond the scope of our political responsibility and not one of the enforceable duties of the welfare state? The argument in this article has been gravely misunderstood if that is the conclusion drawn from it. The central aim of this article was not to dismiss but rather to emphasize and elaborate our strong normative political reasons for concern about inequality. In order to do that, the article has fleshed out a coherent theoretical framework based on the sufficiency view. It concludes that we have strong justice-based reasons to rectify any inequality that represents itself as *of* insufficiency, *within* insufficiency, or with *social* insufficiency. This implies that we should take
urgent political action to eliminate threshold-bound deficiencies such as absolute material poverty as well as social norm-bound deficiencies such as discrimination, social exclusion, and oppression. This, it has been argued, proposes the direction in which politics of inequality should proceed.

Through its evaluation of normative reasons to care about inequality, the article has not attempted to conclude anything about other types of reasons. That is, inequality evidently has several derived effects that can be evaluated on economic or other grounds. This has not been the purpose here. The article has touched on various, both economic and social aspects of inequality only to assess the normative grounds on which to evaluate it. That is, if inequality is problematic beyond its normatively relevant impact, the article has been unable to capture that. As it stands, I can conclude that on the basis of the sufficiency view on inequality, we have no good reason to be concerned with inequality “in and of itself” but very strong reasons to object to inequalities in which threshold-bound deficiencies or social norm-bound deficiencies are involved. This provides a consistent normative base for justifying political actions to rectify large social inequalities but, importantly, for sufficientarian, not egalitarian, reasons.

References


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