

# Why not More Equality? Sufficientarianism and Inequalities above the Threshold<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

For people starting from a presumption in favor of equality, the very idea of a sufficiency threshold where the demands of justice would stop because everyone has enough is puzzling. However, Liam Shields, offers an account of sufficiency that has the potential to reconcile these egalitarians with the principle of sufficiency. This comes from his endorsement of what he calls “the shift thesis”, stating roughly that there is a discontinuity in the weight of our reasons to benefit people once they have enough. This thesis distinguishes his theory from other accounts of sufficientarianism by not denying the injustice of inequalities above the threshold. It thereby changes the way one can look at the relation between sufficiency and equality. The principle of sufficiency becomes the first principle of a conception of justice that must be completed by another – possibly egalitarian – principle. In the first section, I start with a brief exposition of the shift thesis and the way it relates to other accounts of sufficiency. In the second, I introduce a distinction between agnosticism and indifference towards inequalities above the sufficiency threshold. In the third, I argue that pragmatism might provide positive reasons to focus on insufficiency if one is agnostic about these inequalities. I conclude with a brief discussion of this pragmatic stance and of the choice to defend a partial view of justice as Shields does.

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For people starting from a presumption in favor of equality, or the intuition that unless there is a good reason to do otherwise, any distribution of goods or advantages should be equal, the very idea of a sufficiency threshold where the

<sup>1</sup> I thank David Axelsen, Axel Gosseries, Lasse Nielsen, Liam Shields, Julia Sichieri Moura and the anonymous reviewers for useful comments on previous versions of this paper.

demands of justice would stop because everyone has enough is puzzling. What puzzles them in particular is that some inequalities are tolerated by sufficientarians although they do not have a special moral justification (such as being the result of genuine choices, valuable efforts, or 'sacrifice' for the community).

The main merit of Liam Shields' stimulating account of sufficiency as a demand of justice is to potentially reconcile these egalitarians<sup>2</sup> with the principle of sufficiency. This comes from Shields' endorsement of what he calls "the shift thesis", stating roughly that there is a discontinuity in the weight of our reasons to benefit people once they have enough. This thesis distinguishes his theory from other accounts of sufficientarianism by not denying the injustice of inequalities above the threshold. It thereby changes the way one can look at the relation between sufficiency and equality. The principle of sufficiency becomes the first principle of a conception of justice that must be completed by another – possibly egalitarian – principle.

In the first section, I will start with a brief exposition of the shift thesis and the way it relates to other accounts of sufficiency. Then, in light of this, I will introduce in the second section a distinction between agnosticism and indifference towards inequalities above the sufficiency threshold, Shields' position being associated with agnosticism. In the third section, I will argue that pragmatism might provide reasons to focus on insufficiency and leave aside other inequalities if one is agnostic about them. And I will conclude with a brief discussion of this pragmatic stance and of the choice to defend a partial view of justice as Shields does.

## 1. THE SHIFT THESIS AND THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF SUFFICIENTARIANISM

As highlighted years ago by Paula Casal, sufficientarianism is usually conceived as the combination of two different theses: a positive thesis stressing "the importance of people living above a certain threshold" (Casal 2007: 297-298), and a negative thesis denying "the relevance of certain additional distributive requirements" (298). Many people think that it is the negative thesis that makes of sufficientarianism a complete

<sup>2</sup> Egalitarians committed to "comparative fairness" (Temkin 2017) must be distinguished from other egalitarians, like many relational egalitarians, whose position is compatible with some forms of (relational) sufficientarianism. From the latter perspective, if people have enough to stand in a relation of equality with others, no additional redistribution is required. Yet from the viewpoint of comparative fairness, any distributive inequality must be justifiable, whatever its impact on social relations.

and distinctive conception of justice<sup>3</sup>. It is *complete* because there are no distributive requirements other than those expressed by the principle of sufficiency. And it is *distinctive* because it is the only conception of justice that gives a pivotal role to some threshold of sufficiency and disregards the remaining inequalities.

In contrast, the mere affirmation of the positive thesis can be included or absorbed into a more complete and ‘hybrid’ conception of justice such as sufficiency-constrained (luck) egalitarianism<sup>4</sup> or sufficiency-constrained (responsibility-catering) prioritarianism (318-323).

However, Shields proposes another way of understanding the distinctiveness of sufficientarianism. He endorses the positive thesis, which he formulates as follows: “We have weighty non-instrumental reasons to secure at least enough of some good(s)” (Shields 2016: 28). But he rejects the negative one – which he calls “upper limits sufficientarianism” – because of its “inability to condemn some regressive policies, which require greater contributions from the worse off than the better off [when they are both above the threshold], and are unable to condemn huge inequalities between those who have secured enough” (23).

Yet, recognizing that the positive view is not enough to distinguish sufficientarianism from other views of justice that might also include this concern (among others), Shields adds what he calls the “shift thesis”: “Once people have secured enough, there is a discontinuity in the rate of change of the marginal weight of our reasons to benefit them further” (30). This shift thesis is, according to him, what distinguishes sufficiency from priority, because prioritariness usually believe that “priority to the worse-off diminishes at a continuous rate” (30), whereas the sufficientarian threshold marks a discontinuity. This also explains why he does not endorse luck or outcome equality: because unless these views are coupled with a sufficiency constraint, they do not do justice to this discontinuity in the moral importance of redistributions. However, if prioritarianism or egalitarianism were to include a sufficiency constraint, they would become compatible with the principle of sufficiency. Yet Shields does not arbitrate between priority, equality and other candidates. He simply recognizes that the shift thesis is “compatible with a wide range of distributive criteria once everyone has secured enough” (34).

3 See for example Axelsen and Nielsen 2015: 407-408: “[t]he acceptance of the negative thesis is [...] distinctively sufficientarian”.

4 Here we should distinguish between forms of egalitarianism that are themselves sufficientarian (this is the case of several ‘relational’ egalitarian views), others that include a sufficiency constraint, and others yet that reject the moral significance of any sufficiency threshold.

As Shields rejects the negative thesis, we can characterize his sufficientarianism as a *distinctive yet partial* view of justice. The principle of sufficiency is not enough by itself, as it does not provide guidance regarding the treatment of inequalities above the sufficiency threshold. It requires a complementary principle which can be, for example, outcome or luck egalitarian, utilitarian, prioritarian, leximin or maximin – the second principle applying specifically to what we might call the *residual inequalities*.

What is particularly interesting with Shields' view is that it illustrates the distinction that should be made between agnosticism and indifference towards these residual inequalities<sup>5</sup>. Although principles of sufficiency are often defended in *opposition* to principles of equality (see for example Frankfurt 2015; Crisp 2003; Axelsen and Nielsen 2015), Shields' view makes them potentially compatible. It sheds light on the fact that sufficientarians are not necessarily morally indifferent towards residual inequalities. Hence, it makes sufficientarianism attractive for people committed to comparative fairness and yet convinced of the centrality of people having enough. To be sure, this is not new (see Casal 2007 or Gosseries 2011), but this point has usually been made by egalitarians interested in sufficiency, not by sufficientarians. What is more, the shift thesis introduced by Shields has the merit of making this compatibility between sufficiency and equality appear more clearly.

## 2. . INDIFFERENCE AND AGNOSTICISM TOWARDS RESIDUAL INEQUALITIES

Given that sufficientarians face more egalitarian alternatives<sup>6</sup>, they must be able to provide convincing reasons not to equalize social positions beyond what is required to achieve their goal. In other words, they must be able to justify their choice for a principle of sufficiency rather than some principle of equality (or another alternative conception of justice).

Nonetheless, as Shields' case illustrates, some sufficientarians do not

5 Axelsen and Nielsen (2015: 423), for example, seem to conflate the two attitudes, using one term and then the other as if they were similar.

6 Outcome egalitarianism is certainly more egalitarian than any account of sufficientarianism. Yet regarding luck egalitarianism, things are more complex. Given its emphasis on choice, luck egalitarianism can be both more and less egalitarian than sufficientarianism. Unless they include a form of sensitivity to personal responsibility in their principle, which they usually refuse to do (Gosseries 2011: 473), sufficientarians will generally accept more inequalities (related to bad luck) than luck egalitarians, but they will also sometimes reject some inequalities (related to choice) that luck egalitarians might have accepted.

provide this justification. Shields rejects principles of equality that fail to take into account the discontinuity introduced by the sufficiency threshold, but he does not provide a justification for not adopting a form of sufficiency-constrained egalitarianism. And this might be explained by agnosticism towards residual inequalities. Agnostic sufficientarians have a strong feeling or intuition that deprivation (and/or domination) is unjust, but they do not know whether inequalities between well-off people – or billionaires as in the caricatural example often discussed – should be characterized as unjust or not<sup>7</sup>.

Another possibility is that they have an opinion about these inequalities, but they do not know how to argue in favor of it, or consider it a waste of time to make this argument. In this case, they are not really agnostic themselves, but they withhold their judgment and thereby endorse an agnostic *position*.

In contrast with the agnostics, other sufficientarians such as Harry Frankfurt are *morally indifferent* towards residual inequalities. The two attitudes must be carefully distinguished. Agnosticism entails either admitting that one does not know if these inequalities are unjust, or explicitly withholding judgment – which Shields does, for example. Moral indifference means that one does not consider these inequalities as unjust.

What can explain such moral indifference? Following Roger Crisp<sup>8</sup>, for example, one might believe that it is *envy* that leads some of us to develop hostility towards some inequalities which are not unjust in themselves (Crisp 2003: 749), and that it is compassion, not envy, that should feed our judgments of justice and injustice. Although we feel compassion for those who are badly off, we do not feel compassion for well off people having less than other well off people. Hence, rather than pursuing “envy-freeness” through equalizations of bundles of resources, as Dworkin (1981) would recommend, we should fight against feelings of envy and accept some inequalities as an integral part of social life.

Crisp’s argument about envy can of course be objected to. It is not because a judgment (of justice) comes from an inappropriate attitude (envy) that it is wrong<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, it provides us with one explanation why one might be indifferent to inequalities above the sufficiency

7 As suggested to me by David Axelsen, they might also think that we cannot know because we are so far from that world and therefore lack epistemic access to intuitions about these kinds of cases.

8 Crisp himself may not be morally indifferent towards residual inequalities as he expresses sympathy for utilitarianism above the sufficiency threshold (Crisp 2003: 758), and utilitarianism can have redistributive implications.

9 I thank the reviewer who pointed this out.

threshold: a kind of psychological moderation or wisdom characterized by the absence of envy, which is obviously more plausible if the sufficiency threshold is relatively high. Yet some people might also be envy-free for the simple reason that most people in the world are poorer than them. This could be characterized as *biased sufficientarianism*: although this sufficientarian has more than what is sufficient and would probably still have more in a situation where everyone had enough, s/he affirms that sufficiency is enough for the others. In other words, the indifference towards residual inequalities is explained by the fact that the person gains from these inequalities compared with a more egalitarian distribution. To be sure, no sufficientarian is likely to recognize him/herself in this picture. Yet this could be an unconscious bias<sup>10</sup>. And if we want to build impartial moral judgments, we should certainly distrust principles of justice that suit our self-interest, especially when we are quite well off and unlikely to be victims of strong injustices, as most professional philosophers are<sup>11</sup>.

Hence, there is a variety of factors that can explain indifference towards residual inequalities: among others, a particular understanding of the notion of justice and the idea that it should be exclusively based on compassion; a rejection of envious comparisons; or, in some cases, a positional bias. In the next section, I would like to explore a more positive reason why one might be attracted by the principle of sufficiency and disregard residual inequalities: pragmatism. And I will suggest that this could explain Shields' focus on the injustice of insufficiency although he does not completely reject prioritarian and egalitarian views (provided that they include a sufficiency constraint). In other words, the aim of the next section is to provide a charitable interpretation of the reasons one might have to disregard some inequalities. It is an attempt to understand the appeal of sufficientarianism from an egalitarian perspective.

### 3. THE PRAGMATIC APPEAL OF SUFFICIENTARIANISM

What I will call here pragmatism about justice consists in endorsing a principle of justice in light of practical considerations such as its urgency, its achievability, or its action-guidingness<sup>12</sup>. Let us examine these three

10 Similarly, some luck egalitarians or libertarians might be affected by a self-entitlement bias giving them the impression that they deserve more than others. The risk of bias is not specific to sufficientarianism.

11 Certainly, you do not need to have more than enough to defend upper-limit sufficientarianism, but you are less likely to hold this view if you are not above the threshold.

12 This kind of pragmatism differs from the one defended by Elizabeth Anderson and consisting in starting political philosophy from a diagnosis of the injustices in the real world (see Anderson 2010: 3).

possibilities in turn.

First, some might see situations of insufficiency or deprivation as an *urgency* to be solved<sup>13</sup>. Hence, they might consider it preferable to focus on that than on debates about what an implausible equal society would look like. The pragmatism, here, consists in selecting the focus of one's theory in light of what is the most politically important or urgent. In Shields' case, given that he does not seem to have a strong preference or a firm view in the debate between equality and priority above the threshold, this consideration of urgency might explain the choice to defend a partial conception of justice and leave the remaining question open. In particular, if it is true that there is this discontinuity in our reasons to benefit people once everyone has enough, as he argues, it becomes even more legitimate to focus on the urgency of insufficiency. This duty appears as more stringent<sup>14</sup>, and as having priority.

Second, some might think that their fellow citizens are probably more willing to accept the principle of sufficiency – which is in line with the human right to a decent standard of living – than a more demanding<sup>15</sup> and more controversial ideal of equality. Or they might think that it would already be something to reach sufficiency for all, that it is already utopian enough. They would thus prefer the principle of sufficiency for its relative political *achievability*. This kind of pragmatism is often called “non-ideal theory”, or “realism”. It rejects the kind of idealist or utopian theorizing that “does not represent an ideal of political life achievable under even the most favorable circumstances” (Galston 2010: 387). Ian Shapiro, whose view of justice as non-domination is sufficientarian, can be taken as an example of such attitude, as he criticizes many theories of justice for being politically irrelevant (Shapiro 2016: 11-12). Such reasoning might play a conscious or unconscious role in one's choice to focus on sufficiency. Shields himself recognizes, without developing further, the advantages of sufficientarianism in light of non-ideal theory's willingness to set “interim goals that can be achieved” (2016: 199).

Third, one might be led away from luck and outcome egalitarianism because they are not action-guiding enough. Several luck egalitarians, for example, insist that levelling down might sometimes be required by justice,

13 See for example Nathanson 2005: 373, although he argues that decency is even more urgent than sufficiency and should therefore be the criterion of economic justice.

14 Shields actually gives an important role to this notion of stringency in his discussion of global justice (Shields 2016: 177; Harb and Axelsen 2017).

15 Note that although most sufficiency principles are less demanding in terms of redistributions than their egalitarian alternatives, a responsibility insensitive principle of sufficiency (especially with a high threshold) might be very demanding as it would require frequent transfers of resources to the imprudent, for example (see Gosseries 2011: 486-487).

but they press to add that other considerations will militate against levelling down in most cases. In so doing, they can appeal to value pluralism and downplay the importance of justice, which they may consider as an important value among other important values such as community and collective well-being for example (see Temkin 2000: 155; Cohen 2008: 7; 2011: 231; Lippert-Rasmussen 2015). Yet if they do this, one risk is to lose the action-guiding force of the principle of justice (Meijers and Vandamme, 2018). In order to know how to act so as to make the world better, we would then need to take into account not only what justice requires, but also other values we care about<sup>16</sup>. Hence, those who want to maintain the policy-guiding role of the concept of justice have pragmatic reasons to reject the principles of luck and outcome equality. The principle of sufficiency becomes more attractive, in this respect, because it does guide action. If a person suffers from deprivation, she must be helped, no matter how this happened and what other values we care about. Furthermore, the principle of sufficiency avoids most of the counter-intuitive implications plaguing more egalitarian principles when they are (mistakenly) interpreted as action-guiding principles (see Frankfurt 2015).<sup>17</sup>

Shields actually seems to endorse the view that principles of justice should directly guide action, which appears in his affirmation that if a principle “had little significance in terms of policy implications [...] then it could not have an extensive role in our thought” (Shields 2016: 10-11). This might seem uncontroversial, but it is actually not obvious if one considers G. A. Cohen’s distinction between fundamental principles of justice and rules of regulation, the latter only including non-moral considerations such as efficiency, achievability and others in order to directly guide action (Cohen 2008). In the latter view, principles of justice do not by themselves have policy implications, but only when they are associated with the relevant facts and additional values. What Shields seems to be looking for is a clear rule of regulation, and this pragmatic motivation might partly explain his non-selection of luck or outcome equality as the primary or secondary principle of justice. This would not make these alternative

16 Unless there are no other values at stake. But if justice is reduced to comparative fairness, this will not often occur. Most of the time, policies with distributive effects also have aggregative (or relational) effects. Taxation is probably the best example. You cannot just focus on its distributive dimension.

17 One should nevertheless note that if one is concerned with levelling down, as is the case with Frankfurt, the principle of sufficiency may not be the most attractive. Many people will agree that sufficiency for all cannot be pursued at any cost. If, for example, bringing a single person to the sufficiency threshold has a huge cost, and for the same price you could bring an incredible amount of people further away from the threshold, many people will consider it counter-intuitive to opt for the former option. Hence, the principle of priority might appear more attractive – or leximin egalitarianism, not considered by Frankfurt (Gosseries 2011: 468).

principles unjust, but merely inappropriate for Shields' purposes, which is a very different conclusion.

Hence, there is a variety of pragmatic reasons for focusing on the injustice of insufficiency. These reasons do not by themselves justify moral indifference towards residual inequalities, but they help us understand why one might want to take an agnostic position and leave this issue aside, as Shields does.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Let us take stock. Shields argues that there is a discontinuity in our reasons to benefit people once they have enough (1). His rejection of upper-limit sufficientarianism seems to indicate that he is not indifferent towards inequalities above the sufficiency threshold, but adopts an agnostic position (2). His choice to focus exclusively on the injustice of insufficiency, while leaving open the question of residual inequalities could be motivated by pragmatic reasons (3).

1) If the shift thesis is correct (which it is not the aim of this paper to assess<sup>18</sup>), then the principle of sufficiency should become part of any plausible conception of justice. Securing sufficiency for all should be the priority. Yet the very idea of a discontinuity in the rate of change of the marginal weight of our reasons to benefit people, as opposed to upper-limit sufficientarianism, entails that sufficiency cannot be enough. Shields' view of justice stands in need of a complement.

2) Agnosticism is a perfectly legitimate philosophical stance. It has been part of the philosophical wisdom for centuries to recognize our inability to answer some questions. And if it is pragmatism that leads you to sufficientarianism, you might legitimately want to leave aside the trickiest philosophical questions to focus on urgent injustices. You might also (mistakenly) think that we will never have to practically address the question of residual inequalities, because the battle to achieve sufficiency for all will already take centuries. Yet if one enters the philosophical debate about justice, the question is necessarily raised: why not more equality? And in addition to this, a lot of services we benefit from in affluent societies would be above most sufficiency thresholds and yet raise issues of justice<sup>19</sup>. Hence, the question matters both theoretically and practically. This being said, I agree that it matters less, *politically*, than defending sufficiency for all.

18 See Nielsen 2017 for a more critical view.

19 I thank Axel Gosseries for this suggestion.

However, as long as one remains agnostic about these inequalities, one cannot defend a complete theory of justice; only a partial one, which is also legitimate. A partial theory of justice points towards a specific kind of injustice, without the ambition to provide a full picture of a just society. Feminism, for example, can be interpreted as a partial theory of justice, laying the emphasis on the diversity of injustices suffered by women. But most feminist views of justice are (or can be) integrated into a broader framework<sup>20</sup>, not always explicit, which can be egalitarian, sufficientarian, utilitarian or other. In the same vein, sufficientarianism advocating for the positive thesis but not the negative one is a partial view of justice, laying the emphasis on the injustice of deprivation, or insufficiency<sup>21</sup> (and possibly its effects on social relations).

What is particularly interesting in Shields-like accounts of sufficientarianism is that they open the door to reconciliation between (usually) competing views of justice (see also Casal 2007 and Gosseries 2011). One could endorse two principles – sufficiency and outcome or luck equality – as a matter of justice, and sufficiency-constrained prioritarianism or leximin as a rule of regulation allowing departures from justice for efficiency reasons. Redefined as a partial view of justice, the sufficiency principle will be more difficult to attack and might come to be recognized as an essential component of any attractive complete theory of justice, as Shields hopes.

Nevertheless, Shields' argument will probably not convince those who are morally indifferent to residual inequalities. The reason is that it renounces to argue in favor of sufficientarianism as a complete and distinctive theory of justice, superior to its egalitarian, prioritarian and other competitors. In a sense, what Shields does amounts to admitting that there are no good reasons to put forward in favor of the negative thesis, or upper-limit sufficientarianism, or the idea that, once everyone has enough, there are no more requirements of justice.

3) Many people include pragmatic considerations in their reasoning about justice, without necessarily realizing or acknowledging it. Hence, they might be tempted to deny it and affirm that they have principled reasons to defend the view they are attracted to.

Choosing a principle of justice for pragmatic reasons raises several questions, already much discussed in the debate about ideal vs non-ideal

20 The contemporary emphasis on intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), or the idea that women are at the intersection of diverse group affiliations and identities, and hence diverse claims of justice, is an attempt to relocate feminism into a broader picture of justice.

21 As Shields (2016: 27) argues, "deprivation" might point to an excessively low threshold of sufficiency.

theory (see among others Estlund 2014). Hence I shall limit myself here to one comment. Being pragmatic is as such not only legitimate but desirable. Nevertheless, by including pragmatic considerations in one's conception of justice, one runs the risk of making discussions about justice more confused<sup>22</sup>, because justice becomes relative to the author or speaker's appreciation of what is achievable or useful, for example. As there will likely never be a consensus on what is and what is not achievable or useful, there is no common ground to discuss justice, which is highly problematic both from the viewpoint of a community of scientific research and from the perspective of a democratic community searching for common political principles. Hence, before aiming at agreeing on common *principles* of justice, we should first try to reach agreement on the concept of justice: in this concept, do we include pragmatic considerations or not? And it might prove easier to agree on a principle of justice leaving aside pragmatic considerations. Most objections to luck egalitarianism, for example, are practical. If it was not expected to have disincentivizing effects, disrespectful implications or difficulties of implementation, few people would still object to it. In contrast, the appreciation of what is feasible depends a great deal on one's optimism, knowledge of the relevant facts, or appreciation of human nature. Of course, these pragmatic considerations would inevitably reenter the debate at a later stage, but separating the tasks might reduce confusion.

Cohen's distinction between fundamental principles of justice and rules of regulation helps avoiding some debates and confusions about the practicality of different theories of justice. From this perspective, defending a fundamental principle of justice does not commit you to all its implications. The principle does not in itself imply anything about how one ought to act all things considered. And justice is not the only thing that matters: you might care about justice *and* efficiency, *and* political pragmatism, without mixing all these considerations in an all-encompassing principle. Accepting such distinctions might make many disagreements between egalitarians, prioritarrians and sufficientarians disappear. They could then work together towards establishing appropriate rules of regulation in different contexts. Yet the logic of academic research, giving a high premium to apparent originality, or the capacity to distinguish one's view from the others', does not foster agreement between competing

22 This risk is probably more important when pragmatic considerations are hidden than when they are explicitly endorsed as in Anderson (2010)'s pragmatism or Sangiovanni (2008)'s practice-dependence. One important criticism of ideal theorizing is that unless it completely abstracts from facts as Cohen's (2008) does, it runs the risk of hiding pragmatic or context-dependent considerations. I thank David Axelsen for bringing this issue to my attention.

views of justice. Casal and Shields have made one step in a good direction by suggesting that sufficiency can be compatible with equality or priority. The next step could be to recognize the complementarity between egalitarian principles and efficiency-concerned principles such as priority or leximin, the former being fitter as fundamental principles of justice, the latter as rules of regulation.

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