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Is Harry Frankfurt's "Doctrine of Sufficiency" Sufficient?

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ABSTRACT: In his article, "Equality as a Moral Ideal", Harry Frankfurt argues against economic egalitarianism and presents what he calls the "doctrine of sufficiency." According to the doctrine of sufficiency, what is morally important is not relative economic equality, but rather, whether somebody has enough, where "having enough" is a non-comparative standard of reasonable contentment that may differ from person to person given his/her aims and circumstances. The purpose of this paper is to show that Frankfurt's original arguments in support for his doctrine of sufficiency have critical problems that Frankfurt himself does not properly recognize. In the end, I will argue that in order to solve these problems the doctrine of sufficiency cannot help but to incorporate certain prioritarian commitments – commitments which many would view as implying economic egalitarianism. This is embarrassing for a doctrine whose raison d'être was mainly to defeat economic egalitarianism.

KEYWORDS: Egalitarianism – Frankfurt – prioritarianism – sufficiency – sufficientarianism.

1. Introduction

In "Equality as a Moral Ideal", Harry Frankfurt gives a very incisive criticism against "economic egalitarianism" understood as a doctrine that claims that there is moral value in *equality itself* (cf. Frankfurt 1987). A major part of the article tries to show why it is a deep mistake for anybody to hold economic egalitarianism. Along the way, Frankfurt presents his own alternative doctrine to economic egalitarianism, which he calls "the doctrine of sufficiency". The doctrine of sufficiency claims that what is morally important is for people to have enough; where "having enough" is a non-comparative standard of reasonable contentment that may differ from person to person given his/her aims and circumstances. In his original paper, Frankfurt presents two main arguments in support for his doctrine of sufficiency. The purpose of this paper is to show that both of these arguments have critical problems that Frankfurt himself does not properly recognize.[1]

2. Utility thresholds and the condition of scarcity

We start with Frankfurt's own example: the size of population is *ten*, a person needs at least *five* units of resources in order to survive, and there are *forty* units of resources. If we are intending to save anybody from this situation, then it is necessary that some must receive *more than others*; in other words, if we are intending to save at least one person, then, *inequality is necessary*.

We can see that, in this situation, an equal distribution of resources based on economic egalitarianism results in the worst possible outcome; namely, that everybody dies. Frankfurt (1987, 30) claims that "Surely in this case it would be morally grotesque to insist upon equality!".

The reason why an equal distribution of resources results in an undesirable outcome in the above situation is mainly because of the existence of what Frankfurt calls "utility thresholds". Frankfurt's main use of the notion of "utility thresholds" was to object to "the principle of diminishing marginal utility". According to the principle of diminishing marginal utility, when somebody consumes a certain type of good, the marginal utility that that good brings to that person tends to diminish. This is mainly because people

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[1] After the publication of Frankfurt's seminar paper, the doctrine of sufficiency has attracted both proponents (see Anderson 1999; Benbaji 2005; Crisp 2003; Frankfurt 1987; Frankfurt 1997; Huseby 2010) as well as opponents (see Casal 2007; Roemer 2004), and there exists a vast literature that has been developed afterwards. However, the main focus of this paper will be on Frankfurt's original arguments against economic egalitarianism contained in his original paper.

generally tend to get satiated and derive less satisfaction towards the same good when they consume it over and over again.

However, Frankfurt points out that not all goods follow this rule. This is because there are certain goods that actually bring *more utility* to the person *after sustained consumption* than at first. This is when proper appreciation of the good gradually develops only after being exposed to a series of repeated trials and experiences. Here, the repeated trials and experiences serve as what Frankfurt calls a "warming up" process (see Frankfurt 1987, 26). It is easy to find numerous examples of this sort of good in our ordinary life; classical music, fine art, art house movies, certain types of gourmet food all require constant effort and a development of a certain level of maturity in order for the person to give proper appreciation to it.

Frankfurt explains that, when the good in question is money, what corresponds to this "warming up process" is "saving". This usually happens when one is trying to buy a certain good that gives unrivaled satisfaction compared to other goods, but which is too expensive for one to purchase unless one saves up for it. In this case, the last dollar saved that completes the full price of that good would give a utility that is far greater than any other dollar saved up to that very point. Here, the last saved dollar permits what Frankfurt (1987, 27, 30) calls a *crossing of a "utility threshold"*. Generally speaking, whenever there is a utility threshold for a certain good, a non-continuous jump in utility gain occurs at that very crossing threshold point. This makes the total utility achieved by crossing the utility threshold much greater than the individual sum of the utility gained by each individual unit of the good taken separately. In this sense, there is an additional value that is attached to *the completion* of a utility threshold itself when a good happens to have one.[2]

We can see that, in the previous example, each individual has a utility threshold; the utility threshold is five units of resources. Five units of resources is the borderline which demarcates life and death. So, anybody having five units of resources acquires a gain in utility that is significantly larger than the utility a person achieves when the person has only four or less than four units of resources.

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[2] So, Frankfurt plausibly explains that a complete collection of 20 different items has a greater utility than an incomplete collection of 20 items that include duplicates. Here, *completeness* of the collection *itself possesses utility*. See Frankfurt (1987, 27-28, footnote 12).

We can also see that the situation is depicted in a way that the total amount of available resources is *scarce*; there are forty units of resources and there are also ten people which each need five units of resources in order to survive. This means that there are not enough resources to put everybody above the utility threshold; more specifically, in this case, there are not enough resources to save everybody's life.

The main reason why an equal distribution of resources is problematic is because an equal distribution would generally tend to generate a *much fewer* number of individuals who are *above* the utility threshold when resources are scarce; in this case, an equal distribution would put *everybody below* the threshold. This consequence is hard to accept especially when being below the threshold means something grave, such as death, as it is the case in the above situation.

So, in order to save at least one person in the above situation, an unequal distribution of resources is necessary. Presumably, the most reasonable distribution in this case would be to save eight persons with the forty remaining units of resources by giving each of them the five requisite units for survival. Since it is practically feasible to save a total of eight persons in the situation, any alternative distribution that saves less than eight persons seems hardly morally defensible.[3] If a certain distribution principle saves less than eight people, then this is a strong reason to think that the distribution principle in question is not the correct one for this particular situation.

This is why economic egalitarianism seems morally problematic in this particular example; it kills everybody when it is perfectly possible to save eight. So, it seems, at first sight, that economic egalitarianism cannot be a reasonable solution to this example.[4] However, the crucial question is not whether or not economic egalitarianism is a reasonable solution, but whether or nor *Frankfurt's doctrine of sufficiency itself* can be a reasonable solution to this situation. Then, the crucial question is: Can the doctrine of sufficiency save eight persons?

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[3] Anybody who proposes an alternative distribution that saves less than eight persons would have to justify why his/her preferred distribution would be better even though it kills more people than what is necessary. It seems very unlikely for anybody to be able to offer any cogent justification of this sort.

[4] The reason why I say "first sight" is that I will later suggest a possible way for economic egalitarianism to solve this problem.

Frankfurt almost seems to take it for granted that his doctrine of sufficiency will be able to save eight persons; in fact, his main purpose of presenting the above example in the first place was to show that his doctrine of sufficiency is superior to economic egalitarianism *in precisely this respect*. Frankfurt writes:

> Under conditions of scarcity, then, an egalitarian distribution may be morally unacceptable. Another response to scarcity is to distribute the available resources in such a way that as many people as possible have *enough*, or in other words, to *maximize the incidence of sufficiency*. This alternative is especially compelling when the amount of a scarce resource that constitutes enough coincides with the amount that is indispensable for avoiding some catastrophic harm – as in the example just considered, where falling below the threshold of enough food or enough medicine means death. (Frankfurt 1987, 31 emphasis added)

Here, Frankfurt implies that the distribution principle of 'distributing the available resources in such a way that as many people as possible have enough' or, in other words, the distribution principle of 'maximizing the incidence of sufficiency' would be able to save the maximum number of persons (in this case, eight) and that this would be the distribution principle that the "doctrine of sufficiency" would mandate. However, as it becomes evident in the later part of the article, this doesn't actually turn out to be the case. This is because the doctrine of sufficiency does *not* construe "having enough" as "having the amount of resources that is necessary to avoid some catastrophic harm (i.e. death)".

In section VII of the article, Frankfurt explicates quite clearly what the doctrine of sufficiency regards as "having enough". There, Frankfurt distinguishes between two senses of "having enough"; one is that a *limit* has been reached which implies that having more would be undesirable, and the other is that *a certain requirement or standard has been met* without any implication that a larger quantity would be bad. According to Frankfurt,

> In the doctrine of sufficiency the use of the notion of "enough" pertains to *meeting a standard* rather than to *reaching a limit*. To say that a person has enough money means that he is content, or that it is reasonable for him to be content, with having no more money than he has. And to say this is, in turn, to say something like the following: the person does not (or cannot reasonably) regard whatever (if anything) is unsatisfying or dis-

> tressing about his life as due to his having too little money. (Frankfurt 1987, 37)

So, to put it in a simplistic way, "having enough", according to the doctrine of sufficiency, means one has enough to be *reasonably content* with one's life while leaving open the possibility that one would be willing to have more if this were an option that could be achieved without paying significant costs. In other words, having enough is *compatible* with having a mild preference towards having more.

What "having enough" rules out, according to Frankfurt, is having *an active interest* to seek more money than what one already has (cf. Frankfurt 1987, 39). So, when one has enough, one might still be aware that one's situation could be made better than the way it is now; but one does not really care about whether or not one's situation could be improved since one is already quite content with the way things are right now. In other words, when one has enough, say, money, we can say that one finds his/her current monetary situation *reasonably satisfying*.

However, when can we say that somebody's contentment of his/her current state of affairs is *reasonable*? If "having enough" means "being reasonably content", then what does "being reasonably content" imply? Frankfurt provides a quite explicit answer:

> It is essential to understand that having enough money differs from merely having enough to get along or enough to make life marginally tolerable. People are not generally content with living on the brink. The point of the doctrine of sufficiency is not that the only morally important distributional consideration with respect to money is whether people have enough to avoid economic misery. *A person who might naturally and appropriately be said to have just barely enough does not, by the standard invoked in the doctrine of sufficiency, have enough at all.* (Frankfurt 1987, 38, emphasis added)

So, according to the doctrine of sufficiency, "having enough" doesn't mean "having barely enough to survive" since one *cannot be reasonably content* if one only has barely enough; as Frankfurt himself claims "people are not generally content with living on the brink".

However, we can see in the previous example that giving somebody five units of resources is *equivalent to* giving that person just *barely enough resources to survive*, since it is assumed that five units of resources is the minimum amount for anybody to sustain life. This means that the doctrine of sufficiency *cannot* regard giving five units of resources to somebody in the previous example as giving that person "enough".

It seems, then, reasonable to suppose that each individual consists of *two separate utility thresholds*; (a) the threshold of basic survival and (b) the threshold of reasonable contentment. What the doctrine of sufficiency regards as "enough" or "sufficient" is when an individual has enough resources to cross the latter threshold *not* the former threshold. When one is merely provided with resources that enable one to barely cross the first utility threshold, then, according to Frankfurt, the person "does not, by the standard invoked in the doctrine of sufficiency, have enough at all."

This means that saving eight individuals by giving each of them five units of minimum resources in the previous example cannot be an instance of 'distributing the available resources in such a way that as many people as possible have enough' that is mandated by the doctrine of sufficiency. In fact, as long as the two utility thresholds of basic survival and reasonable contentment do not coincide (as it is the case in most practical situations), distributing five units of resources to eight people would actually be a way to *minimize* the incidence of sufficiency; the incidence of sufficiency, in this case, would be *zero*.

Let's illustrate this from a more concrete example. Consider the following situation

Frankfurt's Example of Scarcity Modified

1. Available Resources: 40 units
2. Individuals: Andy, Bob, Chad, Derk, Erin, Fred, Gil, Hun, Ion, Jay (total: 10 persons)
3. The Utility Thresholds of Each Individual

Individual's Name	Andy	Bob	Chad	Derk	Erin	Fred	Gil	Hun	Ion	Jay
Utility Thresholds										
a) Threshold of Survival	(a) 5	(a) 5	(a) 5	(a) 5	(a) 5	(a) 5	(a) 5	(a) 5	(a) 5	(a) 5
b) Threshold of Reasonable Contentment (= Threshold of Sufficiency)	(b) 6	(b) 6	(b) 6	(b) 7	(b) 7	(b) 8	(b) 9	(b)10	(b)11	(b)12

This is a modified version of Frankfurt's example of the situation of scarce resources. In this modified version, the utility thresholds of each of the ten individuals are revealed.

We can see that each individual has *two* separate utility thresholds; (a) the threshold of survival and (b) the threshold of reasonable contentment. The threshold for survival is the same for every individual; everybody needs at least five units of resources in order to maintain life, and this is so regardless of each individual's personal characteristics or temperaments.

However, the threshold for reasonable contentment differs from person to person. This is because the amount to which one may feel reasonably satisfied is partly a function of the individual's personality, as well as his/her own way of valuing things in life, which may have developed throughout the individual's course of life. Note that different people may have different thresholds of what they regard as "enough" satisfaction; some people might simply have what are known as "expensive tastes" which require a lot of resources to satisfy (e.g. *Jay* in the above example); others might have very modest tastes which can be quite easily satisfied even by a meager amount of resources (e.g. *Andy* in the above example.)

It is important to understand that recognizing that different people have different thresholds of reasonable contentment (or sufficiency) is an *integral part* of the doctrine of sufficiency. We can see this from the fact that one of the major criticisms that Frankfurt raises against economic egalitarianism is that economic egalitarianism is essentially *alienating* in the sense that it focuses primarily on the sheer size of how economic benefits are distributed without taking people's specific interests and needs into account. Frankfurt writes:

> A concern for economic equality, construed as desirable in itself, tends to divert a person's attention away from endeavoring to discover – within his experience of himself and of his life – what he himself really cares about and what will actually satisfy him, although this is the most basic and the most decisive task upon which an intelligent selection of economic goals depends. Exaggerating the moral importance of economic equality is harmful, in other words, because it is alienating. (Frankfurt 1987, 23)

Frankfurt emphasizes essentially the same point in a later paper, when he writes:

> Egalitarianism is harmful because it tends to distract those who are beguiled by it from their real interests. (…) The essential thing is not that he compares his situation with theirs, but that he understands his own needs. (…) What one person will require in order to serve his own most authentic interests effectively does not depend upon what another person has. His requirements may differ very considerably (…) from the requirements of individuals who are devoted to attaining goals that differ from his. (…) The erroneous assumption that equality is worth having for its own sake distracts people, in other words, from what is most essential. It leads them to become alienated from themselves. (Frankfurt 2000, 91-92)

So, we can say that one of the major merits that the doctrine of sufficiency has in relation to economic egalitarianism is that it respects, at the level of economic distribution, what is truly important to individuals by trying to provide what is sufficient for each specific person *given his/her specific circumstance, aims, and needs*. In other words, it is important to understand that it is an essential part of Frankfurt's doctrine of sufficiency that it recognizes that different people may have different thresholds of reasonable contentment assessed from his/her own specific circumstances, aims, and needs, and that it is this threshold of reasonable contentment – which differs from person to person – that the doctrine of sufficiency so emphatically urges to satisfy.

This means that when the doctrine of sufficiency tries to maximize the incidence of sufficiency, what it is trying to maximize is, *not* the number of people who has barely crossed the minimum level of subsistence, *but rather*, the number of people who is quite satisfied with his/her life; in other words, based on the example that I have provided above, *what the doctrine of sufficiency tries to maximize is the number of people who cross threshold (b) (= the threshold of reasonable contentment) not threshold (a) (= the threshold of survival)*.

So, when we apply the doctrine of sufficiency to the above example, the distribution that would maximize the incidence of sufficiency would be saving *Andy, Bob, Chad, Derk, Erin, Fred* by giving them each 6, 6, 6, 7, 7, 8 units of the 40 units of available resources. This is the best way to maximize the incidence of sufficiency given the available resources.

Here, we can see that we have managed to make 6 individuals quite content with their own lives while letting 4 individuals die of starvation. Since it was possible to save 8 individuals by distributing 5 units of resources to each of them with the 40 units of available resources, what this shows is that the distribution required by the doctrine of sufficiency actually *kills 2 additional individuals* when it was perfectly possible to save these two people from dying.

Moreover, the reason why these two individuals had to die is mainly because, the doctrine of sufficiency, in an attempt to maximize the incidences of sufficiency (at the level of reasonable contentment), used up the remaining resources, which were left after saving the lives of 6 individuals, to further satisfy these individuals' *non-basic needs* in order to make them content with their lives to the extent that they *no longer have any active interest* to seek more, when it was perfectly possible to use these remaining resources to satisfy other people's *basic needs* and save two more lives! In other words, by following the doctrine of sufficiency, 2 additional lives had to be sacrificed in order to fully satisfy the non-basic needs of 6 individuals. In any case, this seems hardly morally justifiable.

Although it is true that the satisfaction of certain non-basic needs is important for somebody to lead a sufficiently satisfying life given his/her specific aims and interests, the importance of leading a sufficiently satisfying life cannot be compared to the importance of saving a human life itself. Therefore, whenever the satisfaction of non-basic needs and saving a human life conflict, it seems *prima facie* that the saving of a human life should always take precedence over the satisfaction of non-basic needs. The doctrine of sufficiency is flawed to the extent that it takes the precedence between the satisfaction of non-basic needs and saving a human life backwards; and we can see that this is the case in the above example.

It should be further noted that this flaw of the doctrine of sufficiency is not confined to such farfetched thought experiments. Whenever there is a scarcity of resources – where not everybody's basic needs can be fully met or where everybody's basic needs can be fully met but only barely – the doctrine of sufficiency would always recommend a distribution policy that would leave the basic needs of much more people left unsatisfied than what was practically achievable; in other words, whenever we apply the doctrine of sufficiency in circumstances of scarcity, there would always be cases where some people's basic needs are sacrificed for the sake of satisfying other people's non-basic needs. And this is a reason to think the doctrine of sufficiency is flawed in some morally important way.

Then, how might Frankfurt reply to this objection? There seems to be a number of moves that he can make. One move (as it is motivated by the above example) is to allow the existence of *multiple* sufficiency thresholds that range from minimum basic subsistence to reasonable contentment to full contentment, and claim that the satisfaction of somebody's lower sufficiency threshold takes *lexicographic priority* over the satisfaction of another person's higher threshold. This is actually a move that Robert Huseby makes when he defends a dual-threshold version of the doctrine of sufficiency – a version that assumes a maximal (i.e. the threshold of reasonable contentment) and a minimal (i.e. the threshold of critical survival) sufficiency threshold – and claims,

> First, individuals below the maximal sufficiency threshold should have absolute priority over individuals above this threshold. (…) Between the minimal and maximal sufficiency thresholds, I propose that we should apply a constrained and inverse form of prioritarianism. (…) Second, strong priority should be given to those below the minimal sufficiency threshold. (Huseby 2010, 184-185)

This modification of the doctrine of sufficiency will indeed solve the problem presented in "Frankfurt's Example of Scarcity Modified" above and successfully save 8 people. However, Huseby's dual-threshold version of the doctrine of sufficiency faces a problem from which Frankfurt's original version of the doctrine of sufficiency is actually free: *the problem of wasted resources*.

Consider two individuals: call them individual 1 and individual 2. Suppose both individuals' minimal sufficiency thresholds (i.e. the threshold of critical survival) and maximal sufficiency thresholds (i.e. the threshold of reasonable contentment) are respectively 5 and 7 units of resources. Suppose that individual 1 already owns 7 units of resources (i.e. he/she meets his/her maximal sufficiency threshold) while individual 2 owns nothing. Suppose that we have 1 additional unit of resource to distribute. Note that there is no way to redistribute the total amount (i.e. 8 units) of resources that could save both individuals.

Huseby's dual-threshold version of the doctrine of sufficiency, by giving *absolute priority* to individuals below the maximal threshold over individuals above it, *requires* us to distribute the additional unit of resource to individual 2. As a result, individual 2 dies and the resource is wasted. In other words, Huesby's dual-threshold version of the doctrine of sufficiency *morally requires us to waste resources* in this situation. Note that Frankfurt's original doctrine of sufficiency does not suffer from the same problem, as it gives no priority to distributing the remaining resources to the worse-off unless doing so raises that person above the threshold of reasonable contentment.[5] So, modifying Frankfurt's doctrine of sufficiency in a way that takes account of multiple sufficiency thresholds will not solve the problem without cost.

Another move that Frankfurt may make to solve our imminent problem is to restrict the doctrine of sufficiency with what may be called the "Scanlonian Proviso".[6] According to Scanlon, an action X in circumstances C is wrong if and only if "any principle that permitted one to do X in those circumstances could, for that reason, reasonably be rejected" (Scanlon 1998, 95). In light of this, one may restrict Frankfurt's doctrine of sufficiency as follows:

> Frankfurt's Doctrine of Sufficiency with Scanlonian Proviso
> Maximize the incidence of sufficiency – interpreted as reasonable contentment – unless doing so would be disallowed by a principle that one may not reasonably reject.

A general principle that states, "Do not kill more human lives than what is absolutely necessary", seems to be one such principle that one cannot reasonably reject. If we go back to "Frankfurt's Example of Scarcity Modified", now, with the Scanlonian proviso operating, Frankfurt's doctrine of sufficiency so restricted will no longer distribute the available resources in a way that saves only 6 rather than 8 people. This is because doing so will not be allowed by the general principle, "Do not kill more human lives than what is absolutely necessary", a principle that one may not reasonably reject.

This solves the problem. But, note that exactly the same move is available to the economic egalitarian as well. That is, the economic egalitarian may avoid the same problem by restricting the egalitarian principle with the Scanlonian proviso in exactly the same way. Consider:

> Economic Egalitarianism with Scanlonian Proviso
> Distribute economic resources equally across individuals unless doing so would be disallowed by a principle that one may not reasonably reject.

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5 This will become more apparent a little bit later.

6 I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting this for me.

Restricted by the Scalonian proviso, economic egalitarianism will no longer distribute the available material resources equally (and, thereby, kill everybody) as doing so will be disallowed by the same general principle as above, which states “Do not kill more human lives than what is absolutely necessary”, a principle that nobody can reasonably reject.

What all this shows is that Frankfurt’s doctrine of sufficiency may solve the problem in “Frankfurt’s Example of Scarcity Modified” only by either (a) facing a new problem (i.e. the problem of wasted resources) or (b) by making a move that is also readily available for the economic egalitarian to use. In short, unlike what Frankfurt thinks, examples of scarcity do not give any particularly strong reasons to favor doctrine of sufficiency over economic egalitarianism.

3. The doctrine of sufficiency and urgent needs

Frankfurt emphasizes that economic egalitarianism and the doctrine of sufficiency are *logically independent*; an equal distribution can entirely lack sufficiency, and a distribution that satisfies sufficiency can be quite unequal. So, considerations that support one stance cannot be presumed to support the other. However, Frankfurt argues that many proponents of economic egalitarianism provide grounds that actually support only the doctrine of sufficiency and mistakenly think that they have provided grounds for economic egalitarianism.

One common way to argue for economic egalitarianism is to contrast the abject situation of the absolute poor and the situation of the rich. Frankfurt agrees that it is true that the fact that there are people who are suffering from abysmal poverty is itself a situation that is morally undesirable which calls for rectification. And in order to rectify the situation of the absolute poor it might even be necessary to redistribute the surplus resources of the rich and give it to the poor. Undoubtedly, this would make the resulting distribution more equal. However, according to Frankfurt, the mere fact that abysmal poverty is morally undesirable does not entail that there is something wrong with inequality itself, nor does the fact that improving the situation of the poor calls for a more equal distribution entail that equality itself was what we were aiming for when we tried to improve the situation of the poor. Rather, Frankfurt claims that the main reason why absolute poverty is morally objectionable is not because people suffering from absolute poverty have *less*, but because they do not have *enough*.

So, according to Frankfurt, when a proponent of economic egalitarianism argues that a more equal distribution is needed in order to improve the situation of the absolute poor, what he/she is really arguing for is not economic egalitarianism but rather the doctrine of sufficiency (see Frankfurt 1987, 33-34). This conclusion is reinforced when we see that economic egalitarians are not usually troubled by the significant inequality that exists between the rich and the upper middle class.

Another typical confusion of the economic egalitarian, according to Frankfurt, is their ungrounded assumption that the worse-off person always has more *urgent needs* that are unmet than the better-off person. However, according to Frankfurt, this is not true; not only can the relatively worse-off person not have any urgent needs that are unsatisfied, but it might even be the case that the situation of the worse-off person is actually quite good. And if this were to be the case, Frankfurt claims that, a worse-off person could reasonably accept his/her current situation without presuming that any other distributive situation would make him or her worse (see Frankfurt 1987, 36).[7]

Frankfurt presents Nagel as a typical economic egalitarian who relies on the mistaken assumption that the worse-off person always has more urgent needs that are unmet than the better-off person in order to argue for the moral appeal of equality.

> Nagel illustrates his thesis concerning the moral appeal of equality by considering a family with two children, one of whom is "normal and quite happy" while the other "suffers from a painful handicap." If this family were to move to the city the handicapped child would benefit from medical and educational opportunities that are unavailable in the suburbs, but the healthy child would have less fun. If the family were to move to the suburbs, on the other hand, the handicapped child would be deprived but

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7 Here, we can see that Frankfurt is implicitly attacking the acceptability condition that Rawls' "difference principle" ultimately relies on; according to Rawls, any unequal distribution must be able to be reasonably accepted even by the worst-off person of that specific distribution, and we cannot reasonably expect the worst-off person to accept an unequal distribution unless it can be shown that any other alternative distribution would make his or situation even worse.

> the healthy child would enjoy himself more. Nagel stipulates that the gain to the healthy child in moving to the suburbs would be greater than the gain to the handicapped child in moving to the city; in the city the healthy child would find life positively disagreeable, while the handicapped child would not become happy "but only less miserable." (Frankfurt 1987, 36)

According to Frankfurt, Nagel claims that the egalitarian decision in this situation would be to move to the city. And the reason that Nagel provides in order to support this egalitarian decision is that, although it is true that the healthy child would benefit much more by moving to the suburb, the handicapped child has a much *more urgent need* that needs to be satisfied due to his being in a *worse-off position.*

However, according to Frankfurt, this is a mistaken analysis. Frankfurt agrees that the handicapped child has a much more urgent need that needs to be satisfied. This is so, even if the benefit that the healthy child would receive by the family moving to the suburb would be much greater. However, the main reason why the handicapped child has a much more urgent need that must take priority is not simply because the handicapped child is *worse-off* than the healthy child; it is rather because the condition that the handicapped child is suffering is *significantly bad* viewed from an absolute scale. Therefore, Frankfurt claims,

> …the most cogent basis for Nagel's judgment in favor of the handicapped child has nothing to do with the alleged urgency of providing people with as much as others. It pertains rather to the urgency of the needs of people who do not have enough. (Frankfurt 1987, 37)

In other words, according to Frankfurt, our moral intuition that tells us that the family should move to the city rather than the suburbs *supports the doctrine of sufficiency rather than economic egalitarianism.*

However, again I am not sure whether the doctrine of sufficiency can really explain why the family should move to the city in order to satisfy the more urgent need of the handicapped child. Suppose for the sake of argument that the morally right answer to Nagel's example is for the family to move to the city. Remember that the doctrine of sufficiency aims to maximize the incidences of sufficiency where an incidence of sufficiency is achieved when one is provided with enough resources that enable him or her to cross the threshold of "reasonable contentment".

In the above example, the healthy child is described to be "normal and quite happy". From this we can infer that the healthy child is already above the utility threshold of "reasonable contentment". Again, the fact that the healthy child is above the threshold of reasonable contentment doesn't imply that giving more to the healthy child would not give him more satisfaction.

Then, what about the handicapped child? The handicapped child is described as "suffering from a painful handicap". From this it is reasonable to infer that the handicapped child is below the utility threshold of reasonable contentment. However, we can say that the handicapped child is still above the threshold of survival; this is because the child's handicap, although severe, is not something that threatens the child's life. This means that the handicapped child's utility level would be somewhere *in between* the threshold of survival and the threshold of reasonable contentment; presumably, the handicapped child's utility level is much closer to the threshold of survival than it is to the threshold of reasonable contentment considering that the child is suffering from a, not just ordinary, but a "painful" handicap.

Now, in order to see which decision (between moving to the city and moving to the suburbs) that the doctrine of sufficiency would support, we would need to see which decision would actually maximize the incidences of sufficiency, where sufficiency is measured by whether or not somebody's utility level is above the threshold of reasonable contentment.

If the family moves to the city, then the utility level of the healthy child drops below the threshold of reasonable contentment. This can be inferred from the fact that, by assumption, the healthy child would find life *positively disagreeable* in the city. If a "normal and quite happy" child starts to find his life "positively disagreeable", then this suggests that the child is no longer reasonably content with his/her life. So, by moving to the city, the healthy child drops below the threshold of reasonable contentment.

Then, what happens to the handicapped child if the family moved to the city? The utility level of the handicapped child would undoubtedly go up; but, based on the assumption of the story, *only marginally*. This can be inferred from the fact that if the family moved to the city, then the handicapped child would "not become happy but only less miserable." In other words, although the utility level of the handicapped child would go up, it would still be below the threshold of reasonable contentment. In short, even if the family moved to the city, the handicapped child would not achieve "sufficiency".

Now, suppose that the family moved to the suburbs. How would this make the situation turn out? In terms of the healthy child, moving to the suburbs would make the already quite happy child much happier. So, the utility level of the healthy child would still be above the threshold of reasonable contentment but by a wider margin. In terms of the handicapped child, moving to the suburbs would definitely not increase the child's utility level, but it would, nonetheless, not drop the utility below the threshold of survival; the handicapped child would not die even if the family moved to the suburbs.

So, here is the summary of the situation: if the family moves to the city, the total incidence of sufficiency drops from 1 to 0. If the family moves to the suburbs, then the total incidence of sufficiency remains the same, which is 1. Therefore, in order to maximize the incidence of sufficiency, the family should move to the suburbs. In other words, it turns out that the doctrine of sufficiency supports the (non-egalitarian) decision to move to the suburbs!

Let's modify the situation in certain ways so that the doctrine of sufficiency would generate the desired answer for the situation at hand; which is to support the family's decision to move to the city.

First, what if we assume that the utility level of the healthy child would not drop below the threshold of reasonable contentment even if the family moved to the city; the healthy child would unquestionable find less enjoyment than he/she would have if the family moved to the suburbs, but suppose that the child would still find his/her life quite satisfying in the city as well. In this case, the incidences of sufficiency would be the same (i.e. 1) regardless of whether the family moved to the city or whether the family moved to the suburbs. And if this were the case, wouldn't the doctrine of sufficiency support the family's decision to move to the city by considering the desperate situation of the handicapped child as the "tie breaker"?

Not necessarily. In order to see that the doctrine of sufficiency would not necessarily support the family's decision to move to the city even in this situation, we would need to see what Frankfurt claims about the distribution of additional resources that would not contribute to increasing the incidences of sufficiency.

Suppose, in Frankfurt's original example of scarce resources, the available resources were 41 units instead of 40 units. In this case, one unit of resource would still be left after saving eight people by giving them each five units of resources which is required for minimum survival. How should this one extra unit distributed? According to Frankfurt, it doesn't automatically follow from such situation that the remaining one extra unit should be given to one of the two persons who haven't been allocated with any resources. According to Frankfurt, this is because,

> …one additional unit of the resource in question will not improve the condition of a person who has none. By hypothesis, that person will die even with the additional unit. What he needs is not one unit but five. It cannot be taken for granted that a person who has a certain amount of a vital resource is necessarily better off than a person who has a lesser amount, for the larger amount may still be too small to serve any useful purpose. (Frankfurt 1987, 31)

Frankfurt adds,

> Those below a utility threshold are not necessarily benefited by additional resources that move them closer to the threshold. What is crucial for them is to attain the threshold. Merely moving closer to it either may fail to help them or may be disadvantageous. (Frankfurt 1987, 32)

From this Frankfurt concludes,

> It may be morally quite acceptable, accordingly, for some to have more than enough of a certain resource even while others have less than enough. (Frankfurt 1987, 32)

This has very important implications for our current purposes, since we can think of the family's decision on whether they should move to the city or whether they should move to the suburbs as *essentially the same* as the decision on how we should distribute the one extra unit of resource in our first example.

Regardless of which decision the family makes, the healthy child would always be above the threshold of reasonable contentment by assumption. However, the family's moving to the suburb would make the healthy child's life much more satisfying. In this way, the family's moving to the suburb would be analogous to the decision of giving the extra unit of resource to one of the eight persons who already received enough resources to live; the family's moving to the suburb would be giving the healthy child *more than enough*, when his sibling, the handicapped child, has *less than enough.*

By contrast, the family's decision of moving to the city would be analogous to the decision of giving the extra unit of resource to one of the two persons who have not received any resources. Just as giving the extra unit of resource to one of these two persons would only make the person move slightly closer to the threshold of survival without crossing it, the family's moving to the city would only let the handicapped child move slightly closer to the threshold of reasonable contentment without crossing that threshold; as it is assumed, the handicapped child would not become happy but only *less miserable* by moving to the city.

If this is the case, then we can see that the doctrine of sufficiency would not necessarily recommend the family to move to the city. In fact, we can see from Frankfurt previous remarks that the doctrine of sufficiency would actually regard the family's decision to move to the suburbs as *morally acceptable*.

This is because, although it is true that the family's moving to the city would improve the situation of the handicapped child, the improvement that the handicapped child would be too small for the doctrine of sufficiency to regard as morally significant. According to the doctrine of sufficiency, improvements are morally significant only when they make people cross thresholds of reasonable contentment. Since moving to the city does not make the handicapped child cross the threshold of reasonable contentment, it is perfectly permissible (or it might even be preferable), according to the doctrine of sufficiency, for the family to move to the suburbs. In short, even in this modified situation, the doctrine of sufficiency does not recommend the family to move to the city.

If we really want the doctrine of sufficiency to recommend the family to move to the city, it is necessary for us to modify *both* the situation as well as the doctrine of sufficiency itself.

First, the situation would have to be modified so that the handicapped child would *die* if the family moved to the suburbs and *live* if the family moved to the city. Second, we would need to make a move similar to that of Huseby and allow the existence of *multiple* sufficiency thresholds for which the satisfaction of lower sufficiency thresholds takes lexicographic priority over the satisfaction of higher sufficiency thresholds. That is, in order to allow the family to make the morally right decision to move to the city on the basis of the doctrine of sufficiency, the doctrine of sufficiency *itself* would have to be modified, perhaps, in the following way:

The Lexicographic Doctrine of Sufficiency

(1) Maximize the incidence of crossing sufficiency thresholds.

(2) Whenever the satisfaction of two or more utility thresholds conflict, the satisfaction of the lower sufficiency threshold takes absolute priority over the satisfaction of higher sufficiency threshold.

The lexicographic version of the doctrine of sufficiency would be able to recommend the family to move to the city in the modified scenario in which the handicapped child would *die* if the family moved otherwise.

This is because even if the healthy child's welfare will drop below the threshold of reasonable contentment by moving to the city, the modified version of the doctrine of sufficiency would still recommend the family to move to the city as such sacrifice is necessary to move the handicapped child above the critical threshold of survival – a threshold which takes lexicographic priority over the threshold of reasonable contentment of the healthy child. Also, unlike Frankfurt's original doctrine of sufficiency, the lexicographic version would be able to save eight individuals in the first example of scarce resources. However, this is all because, unlike the doctrine of sufficiency, there is a certain *prioritarian element* embedded in the lexicographic version of the doctrine of sufficiency; namely, that, in adjudicating which sufficiency threshold to satisfy, the threshold of the worse off person takes priority over that of the better off person.[8]

However, it should be noted that even the lexicographic version of the doctrine of sufficiency would not be able to recommend the family to move to the city in Nagel's *original example,* in which the handicapped child would not die regardless of where the family moved; this is because, in such case, there will be no conflict between satisfying either the lower sufficiency threshold of the handicapped child or the higher sufficiency threshold of the normal child, as the handicapped child will, in either option, remain *in between* the threshold of survival and the threshold of reasonable contentment. As the healthy child will be above the threshold of reasonable contentment in the suburbs while he/she will fall below such threshold in the city, the fact that the handicapped child will remain in between the thresholds of survival and reasonable contentment in either option mandates that even the lexicographic version of the doctrine of sufficiency will morally require the family to move to the suburbs.

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[8] For a defense of the priority view, see Parfit (1997; 2002).

In order for the lexicographic doctrine of sufficiency to recommend the family to move to the city in Nagel's original example, it must give up Frankfurt's basic stance concerning the distribution of additional resources that does not contribute to achieving any additional sufficiency thresholds; in other words, the lexicographic doctrine of sufficiency would have to claim that after maximizing the incidences of crossing sufficiency thresholds (in order of lowest to highest), any additional resources that are left should be distributed to the worse-off person even if this does not contribute to making that person cross any additional sufficiency thresholds.

However, by doing so, we can see that, now, not only does the doctrine of sufficiency have some prioritarian elements, but it has virtually collapsed into prioritarianism, which claims that "benefits to the worse off should be given more weight" even when doing so does not result in crossing of any additional sufficiency thresholds (cf. Parfit 1997, 213). Of course, prioritarianism is not exactly the same as economic egalitarianism; unlike economic egalitarianism, prioritarianism does not *aim at* achieving economic equality *per se*. However, it is clear that, by giving more moral weight to the worse off (independent of whether such measure results increases the number of crossing sufficiency thresholds), in any given problem of economic distribution, prioritarianism has a *built-in bias towards equality*. This is why some authors have characterized prioritarianism as a doctrine that is "derivatively (if not, directly) egalitarian" (cf. Benbaji 2005, 312). In this sense, prioritarianism is a member of a broadly egalitarian family of views. This means that if we do think that it is morally preferable for the family to move to the city for the sake of the handicapped child in Nagel's original example, then it seems that this cannot be properly explained without invoking some basic intuitions – more specifically, prioritarian intuitions – that naturally support economic egalitarianism. This is, indeed, a very embarrassing result for the doctrine of sufficiency whose raison d'être was mainly to defeat economic egalitarianism.

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