

## Capabilitarian Sufficiency: Capabilities and Social Justice

**Abstract** This paper suggests an account of sufficientarianism—i.e. that justice is fulfilled when everyone has enough—laid out within a general framework of the capability approach. In doing so, it seeks to show that sufficiency is especially plausible as an ideal of social justice when constructed around key capabilitarian insights such as freedom, pluralism, and attention to empirical interconnections between central capabilities. Correspondingly, we elaborate on how a framework for evaluating social justice would look when constructed in this way and give reasons for why capabilitarians should embrace sufficientarianism. We do this by elaborating on how capabilitarian values underpin sufficiency. On this basis, we identify three categories of central capabilities; those related to biological and physical needs, those to fundamental interests of a human agent, and those to fundamental interests of a social being. In each category, we argue, achieving sufficiency requires different distributional patterns depending on how the capabilities themselves work and interrelate. This argument adds a new dimension to the way capabilitarians think about social justice and changes how we should target instances of social justice from social-political viewpoint.

**Keywords:** The Capability Approach; Sufficiency; Social Justice; Martha Nussbaum; Pluralism; Positional Goods.

### Introduction

The capability approach, in most instantiations, is not a theory of social justice setting out an ideal societal distribution of benefits and burdens toward which we should strive. Rather, it is a broad normative space for the evaluation of people's well-being and freedom with many possible

applications (Sen 1993; 2005; Robeyns 2005). And while this ecumenical foundation and the cross-cultural applicability by which it is accompanied is one of the main strengths of the approach, it leaves open many important questions as well. Not least, it does not tell us much about *which* capabilities we should seek to enhance, *how much* we should do so, and *why* this is important. On the other hand, while theories of social justice often provide relatively convincing and well-developed answers to these questions, they are often developed in a philosophical space somewhat isolated from actual processes of human development. This, many would argue, limits their potential for guiding concrete agents acting in the context of such processes. In this article, we attempt to bridge the gap between these two perspectives by proposing an ideal of social justice informed by the capability approach, which we shall term *capabilitarian sufficiency*. In a previous article, we have suggested that a sufficientarian ideal of social justice could be a good companion for the capability approach (Axelsen & Nielsen 2015), but here we wish to specify and elaborate on *how* and *why* this is the case. Where our previous article suggested the potential for approximation between the two conceptual cores, this one actively pursues a fusion.

To clarify, accounts of sufficiency entail both *a positive thesis*; that bringing people above some threshold is especially important, and *a negative thesis*; that above this threshold, inequalities are irrelevant or alternatively, *a shift thesis*; that inequalities above the threshold are significantly less important (see Casal 2007 and Shields 2012, respectively). The positive thesis is fairly uncontentious – both within theories of social justice and in different forms of the capability approach. The negative thesis, on the other hand, would be rejected by many who find inequalities above the threshold very relevant to justice. The acceptance of the negative thesis and the involved potential inequalities at higher levels is, thus, distinctively sufficientarian. However, accepting the negative thesis is also, we shall claim, especially well-tuned to the

insights of the capability approach – especially, if, as is the case here, the sufficiency threshold is built on a foundation of capabilitarian insights.

Some sufficientarian theorists such as Harry Frankfurt (1987) and Robert Huseby (2010) define the threshold of sufficiency level in terms of contentment (or reasonable contentment), thus suggesting a relatively *high* and *subjective* threshold. But although contentment gives us a plausible explanation to why we should accept the negative thesis—that is, being content seems in a relevant way to weaken ones claim for additional resources—it is less successful as a reason for accepting the positive thesis. In other words, it seems fair to challenge the claim that it is *critically* important from a justice point of view that no one must be discontent. As Paula Casal (2007) points out, this is a general issue when employing a high threshold, since this very often means compromising universal allegiance to the reasons underlying the positive thesis. Capabilitarians have long been sceptical of relying on purely subjective evaluations when determining people’s wellbeing and relying on capabilitarian reasoning can help sufficientarians escape this danger.

Other sufficientarians suggest a fairly *low* threshold—e.g. basic needs or basic rights (Miller 2007; Shue 1996)—but while these accounts do well in justifying what is so critically important about reaching the threshold, they face problems with explaining why inequalities *above* the threshold are unimportant to justice. Thus, as Casal (2007) notes their answer to the negative thesis is less plausible, as, for example, not being concerned by inequality between the super-rich and people who have barely enough seems problematic. Although, capability theorists are less explicit about inequalities at this level, we will argue that the pluralist view about what is valuable in a human life can help ground the negative thesis – and do so in a way that makes both sufficientarianism and capability theory stronger.

Elsewhere, we have suggested and defended a sufficientarian ideal of social justice via the concept of *freedom from duress*, by which we mean “the freedom from significant pressure against succeeding in central areas of life” (Axelsen & Nielsen 2015). At the heart of this account is the three-step argument that: (a) justice is concerned only with people’s opportunities in central, as opposed to non-central, areas of life; (b) that a critical threshold of sufficiency exists in each particular central area; and (c) that what effectively determines sufficiency in a specific area depends on the distributional logic of the capabilities within that area. Thus, we conclude, sufficiency as freedom from duress implies, “that justice is limited in scope, pluralist in nature, and variable in pattern” (2015). This account, we claim, does a better job than alternative sufficiency views in terms of justification of both the positive and the negative thesis.

The account of sufficiency as freedom from duress is loosely informed by general insights from the capability approach, but importantly, it is not *committed* to it. In fact, our account is compatible with a wide range of measures that adopt an objective view of value. In this paper, we unfold a pluralist sufficientarian account of social justice explicitly within the capability approach. We do this by elaborating upon the capabilitarian notions of universally important aspects of human life and the pluralism of the human good, and their implications for sufficiency. We, then, identify three broad categories of central human capabilities that seem to be common to capability theorists: 1) capabilities related to biological and physical human needs; 2) capabilities related to fundamental interests of a human agent; and 3) capabilities related to fundamental interests of a social being, and show how these relate to sufficiency. What sufficiency *means* with respect to these three categories differs greatly, as they are governed by different distributional logics. These logics are understood by unpacking the dynamics in play

within the respective categories and how different holdings affect one's overall level of capabilities. Elaborating on ideas which are already present in capability theory and bolstering this by way of empirical insights and the concept of positional goods, we show why inequalities above the threshold can and should matter to capability theorists and sufficientarians alike - but because these create insufficiencies. First, however, we will outline the contours of sufficiency within the normative framework of the capability approach.

### **Sufficiency and capabilities**

According to capability theorists, other theories of justice tend to overlook important aspects of human existence and differences between human lives. For example, the utilitarian focus on maximizing utility is thought to be insufficiently sensitive to the societal distribution and the separateness of the individuals whose lives are at stake (Nussbaum 2006, 71-72). This point is, of course, not particular to capability theorists, but is also held by many liberals. At the same time, theories that focus solely on the amount of resources available to a person are believed to overlook the important differences in people's abilities to convert resources into functionings (Sen 1992), while theories focusing on welfare overestimate the reliability of subjective preferences (Nussbaum 2000, 122-142). These latter points of criticism have mainly been directed against egalitarians, but of course they apply to resource or welfare *sufficientarians*, like the ones mentioned above, as well. These points of criticism spell out both how capability theory lends itself best to non-welfarist accounts of social justice and the problems we avoid by formulating sufficiency in capability terms.

The tenet of the capability approach is that we should be concerned with securing individual people's capabilities—opportunity to achieve valuable combinations of functionings,

or, in other words, what people are actually able to do and to be (Sen 2005; Nussbaum 2006, 70)—as opposed to, say, maximizing or equalizing preference satisfaction, welfare, or wealth. Capabilitarians hold that these latter approaches simplify what is important in a human life, and that a theory of justice must necessarily be concerned with several aspects of the human reality that cannot be collapsed into one dimension without losing vital information. In Martha Nussbaum’s work, for example, the basis for this criticism lies in the notion that there is some central core to human life or, one might say, a shared base for humanity defined by central human capabilities. These different capabilities are implicitly believed to entail a threshold below which truly human functioning is not available. Getting people above this point is therefore of special importance (Nussbaum 2006, 293). In a similar vein, Amartya Sen (1999, 87) has pointed to some basic capabilities for which it is crucially important to secure functionings above a certain level. Thus, capabilitarians, at least implicitly, subscribe to an unelaborated form of the positive thesis. That is, although they are unclear about its nature and content, they agree that some level of capabilities exists, below which no one should find themselves. We will try to broaden and clarify a capabilitarian basis for accepting this claim.

As mentioned, the capability approach does not usually involve taking a clear stand on social justice. This is most plainly the case with respect to the negative thesis – that is, what justice requires above the threshold. One reason for not tackling this question explicitly seems to be that their main interest lies within the current world distribution, in which far too many have far too little with regards to their central capabilities (Sen and Nussbaum, especially, are mainly concerned with the world’s developing countries). Another is that it is simply no easy task to come with a well-reflected answer. As Nussbaum points out, “it is a difficult question how far adequacy of capability requires equality of capability. Such a question can be answered only by

detailed thought about each capability, by asking what respect for equal human dignity requires” (Nussbaum 2011, 40-41). We will pursue a more informed basis for answering this question by elaborating on reasons for why capability theorists should accept the negative thesis explicitly, and why they can do so without giving up their special attention to injustices in the actual world. Our account will take its point of departure in the idea that different types of capabilities are governed by different distributional logics, and thus, that what it means to have enough varies accordingly. In doing so, we will show how embracing a pluralist sufficientarian ideal of social justice can help overcome some of the shortcomings identified in the capability approach.

### **Central capability categories**

As mentioned, capability theorists hold that other theories of distributive justice are not sufficiently sensitive towards important differences between human lives (i.e. their ability to convert resources into functionings), and further, that they do not distinguish adequately between different *aspects* of human life. This is significant, according to capability theorists, since the most important aspects of a human life are “not commensurable in terms of any single quantitative standard” (Nussbaum 2006, 166) and because some capabilities and the functionings they enable are more important than others, and should, thus, receive special attention. Capability theorists differ on, *which* exact capabilities are the important ones, and on *how* a list of such might be made. Nussbaum, most notably, has proposed an index of central human capabilities, which she claims are common to all human beings across cultures. The overall idea of Nussbaum’s work is that there is some central core to the human life defined by central human capabilities. Her list includes *life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one’s environment* (2000, 78-

80; 2006, 6-78; 2011, 33-34). Sen, on the other hand, maintains that the capability approach ought not commit to one singular theoretical list but should be deliberately underspecified so as to ensure people's *agency*, not only in regards to their effective access to the relevant functionings, but also in terms of having democratic influence on the process of deciding which capabilities are relevant. In other words, influence through choice over the process of listing relevant capabilities is in itself a freedom that should be reflected in the capabilities that people ought to have (Sen 1993; 1997; 2005; 2009, 242). Consequently, as Sen forcefully stresses, "To insist on a 'fixed forever' list of capabilities would deny the possibility of progress in social understanding, and also go against the productive role of public discussion, social agitation, and open debates" (Sen 2005, 160).

Several other theorists have positioned themselves in relation to this distinction. In order to maintain the political impact and applicability stemming from formulations of objective lists, while at the same time safeguarding the individual agency-element that is so fundamental to the capability approach in Sen's original form, Ingrid Robeyns has suggested to move beyond a single universal list of capabilities, and focus on coming up with *relevant criteria* for creating lists of capabilities for each particular use of the capability approach to a specific field (Robeyns 2011). In a similar vein, Sabina Alkire argues against Nussbaum's account, that there can be no singular list that applies for all purposes and, thus, the selection of relevant capabilities must be done *repeatedly* and be sensitive to its particular *use* in a specific field and place (Alkire 2005; Alkire 2002, 51-53).

We attempt to strike a balance between the two by not committing to a specific list of central capabilities, but instead delineating three broad categories which are distinguished not by their particular content but by their distributional logics. In other words, what sets the categories



apart is *what it takes* to achieve sufficiency with respect to this type of capability. In doing so, we seek to avoid one line of criticism made against some capability accounts suggesting that they arbitrarily exclude certain valuable capabilities (Vallentyne 2005, 361-363) without succumbing to subjective welfarism. The categories are not fixed sets or bundles of capabilities, but should be understood as a *typology* of capabilities with the central purpose of classifying justice-relevant capabilities in terms of how they should be distributed. Thus, the central claim here is that if we believe that there is a range of capabilities, which are all important in their own right, and that these are not commensurable, then the governing distributive principles should be informed by the particular distributional logics of the different types of capabilities. This is necessary to properly understand which level of the specific capability is required by justice – which level is sufficient. We shall proceed with the following typological categories of capabilities, which we believe any objective definition of social justice must include:

1. *Capabilities related to biological and physical human needs.* These are the capabilities of enjoying commodities that every human being *needs* in order to ensure biological and physical wellbeing. Obvious examples include the capabilities for nourishment, water, health, clean air, shelter, reproduction, sexual fulfilment, and physical security. These capabilities ensure the survival and bodily needs of members of the human species.
2. *Capabilities related to fundamental interests of a human agent.* These are capabilities related to *individual autonomy*. In other words, they are those that are needed to form and reform valuable ends. They include the capabilities of rational reflection, imagination, critical thinking, normative evaluation, functional and technical skills, understanding the implications of choices and actions for one's life, working, having the

emotional capacities to feel an appropriate range of human emotions, and feeling emotional attachment with other human beings.

3. *Capabilities related to fundamental interests of a social being.* These are capabilities needed for pursuing one's valuable ends *within a community* and, more generally, for relating to fellow human beings in the appropriate way. These include the capabilities for political freedoms such as the freedom to vote, the freedom of assembly and association, and the freedom from discrimination and oppression, but also access to some form of market in which one can trade on fair terms with others, the capability of enjoying a sufficiently high societal status, not to be dominated by others, etc.

The characterization given here is not to be interpreted as the final end goal of any human life. Rather, they are three categories of capabilities that any human life must contain and thus that any plausible account of social justice needs to incorporate in a way that is sensible to the belief that the central capabilities are theoretically incommensurable — although very often in practice intertwined. This means that one cannot make simple trade-offs, and make up for a lack in one central capability by giving someone a larger amount of another (Nussbaum 2006, 167). Giving someone better capabilities for health and nourishment, for example, cannot justify curtailing their political rights, discriminating against them, or stunting their rational development. Thus, the conclusion proceeds, if justice is concerned with capabilities, it must be concerned with sufficiency in the sense of pursuing adequacy of capability; and if concerned with sufficiency in this sense, we need to understand what it takes to reach an adequate level of capability in each central area of human life. Thus, it follows that any theory, social assessment or political arrangement that adhere to justice would involve a suitable index of capabilities that revolves around a sufficiency threshold that is pluralist in nature and that this indexing procedure must

take into account the distributional logics of the different types of central capabilities. In order to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the content of the kind of threshold by which capabilityarians are motivated, the following sections will unfold and defend the pluralist nature of the threshold and elaborate on distributional logics of the different types of capabilities.

### **Thresholds in plural**

As mentioned above, any sufficientarian theory of distributive justice must accept, and justify why we should accept, that bringing people above some critical threshold is especially important (the positive thesis). We are yet to establish, however, what is special about this threshold or, you might say, *why* the threshold should be given special importance. As reflected in the disagreement on which exact capabilities are most important, capabilityarians also describe the *value* that one obtains when getting above the threshold differently. Nussbaum has given the most explicit account of what is at stake. Leaning on Aristotle's theory of the human good, she describes her list of central human capabilities as *enabling people to live a life in human dignity* (Nussbaum 2000, 70-77; 2006, 160-162; 2011, 40-41). This entails being able to function in a *truly human way*, as opposed to, say, an animal way. Thus, mere survival or the fulfillment of basic needs is not enough. For example, while eating just to survive might suffice for an animal, this is not enjoying food in a human way, nor, more clearly, is it a way to eat that is compatible with a life in human dignity.<sup>1</sup> For Nussbaum, then, making people sufficiently well-off means giving them adequate capabilities for a life in human dignity. Inversely, not having enough means not having these dignity-facilitating capabilities.

Regardless of specific variations in foci within the capabilityarian framework, any capability-based sufficiency account implies that whether or not one is sufficiently well-off cannot be determined solely by reference to one's own preferences or level of resources; and that

being sufficiently well-off does not necessarily mean being as well-off as everyone else in these areas. Taken together, we claim, these insights and intuitions stemming from within the broad framework of the capabilities approach offer a plausible foundation on which to conceptualize the content of the positive thesis. This entails bringing people above a certain capability threshold. But, whereas sufficientarians usually hold that it is especially important to bring people above a certain threshold from the point of view of justice, we claim that *several* such thresholds exist. Traditionally, sufficientarianism has been unfolded within the discourse of telic distributive theory and, thus, defined in relation to views of philosophers such as Larry Temkin (2003) and Derek Parfit (1997). But whereas these views all hold a one-dimensional monist view of value (such as welfarism), and, consequently, so does the sufficientarianism that defines itself in contrast with these views (such as Frankfurt 1987, Crisp 2003, and Huseby 2010), the capability approach is fundamentally pluralist. It implies that the value of the human life is inevitably multidimensional—that is, it is concerned with various types of valuable functionings and capabilities (Sen 1992, 49; Nussbaum 2000, 81) and, moreover, it acknowledges that what social justice is, in general, concerned with is, “our ability to achieve various combinations of functionings that we can compare and judge against each other in terms of what we have reasons to value” (Sen 2009, 233). Moreover, because of the capabilitarian belief in incommensurability of the central capabilities, neither will it suffice to focus on some aggregate measure of capability. Instead, we must ensure that she has an adequate level of capabilities in *all* the relevant spheres. While the positive thesis in Casal’s original version entails that bringing people above *some* critical threshold (of well-being) is especially important from the point of view of justice, we argue, that such a critical threshold exists for *all* central capabilities. This does not require that any account of justice must, by itself, be able to identify which *specific* capabilities

are relevant (as discussed above), but merely that, whatever these might be, the relevant threshold must be identified for *every* relevant capability.

Taken together, we claim that the universal concern of justice in an abstract sense is to ensure that everyone has sufficient capabilities in each relevant area of human life, and that differences between those that have achieved this are irrelevant (from the point of view of justice). Again, however, it is important to note that what is required to reach the threshold and, thus, to have sufficient capabilities—that is to say, *where* the threshold lies—may differ among the varying capability categories. Below, we will elaborate on this difference by linking capability sufficiency with empirical insights about inequality and with the notion of positional goods in order to illuminate and outline the distributional logics of the different categories of capabilities, and make it clearer why justice should not be concerned with inequalities above the threshold—that is, why we should accept the negative thesis.

### **Pluralism and positional goods**

As noted, the central capabilities must be taken as situated within distinct distributional categories, critically important in their own right, and hence a distributive scheme informed by capability sufficiency must incorporate pluralism as a fundamental component of distributive justice. This pluralism entails that the different capabilities cannot be measured on a single dimension and are also incommensurable. This may, at first glance, seem like a weakness since policy makers might be unsure about how to prioritize when unable to compare the different capabilities on a single dimension. Capability theorists, however, emphasize how this more honestly than monist theories captures the complexity of human life, and that forcing fundamentally distinct capabilities onto a single dimension often simplifies, and thereby obscures, what is actually not simple. Moreover, the entailed pluralism implies that each

capability should be understood appropriately based on its distributional logic. In other words, the different central capabilities constitute fundamentally different dimensions of the human good, and this distinctness is reflected in how they should be distributed. Although, this point has not been adequately elaborated within capability theory, the argumentative core is recognized within the framework. Nussbaum, for example, states that: “It appears that all the political, religious, and civil liberties can be *adequately* secured only if they are *equally* secured. To give some groups of people unequal voting rights, or unequal religious liberty, is to set them up in a position of subordination and indignity vis-à-vis others. It is to fail to recognize their equal human dignity. On the other side, there are other capabilities, closely connected with the idea of property or instrumental goods, where what seems appropriate is *enough*” (2006, 292-293). So, as Nussbaum indicates, sufficiency or having enough entails different distributions for different goods or capabilities. Thus, having an adequate amount of a certain capability sometimes means being above an absolute threshold that has no or little relation to what other people have, while it means having as much as or almost as much as others regarding the distribution of other capabilities. Anderson affirms the same thought; “For some functionings, equal citizenship requires equal levels. [...] But for other functionings, standing as an equal does not require equal levels of functioning” (1999, 318-319).<sup>ii</sup> In other words, properly understanding the individual capabilities and how they empirically operate allows us to see how inequalities, when problematic, are *actually* best understood as insufficiencies.

Thus, the importance of being sensitive to the particular type of capability and its distributive logic is already inherent in capability-based theories of social justice. But it is yet to be more systematically addressed and discussed how this general insight affects capability principles of social justice. In this section, we will elaborate on this idea by coupling it with the

notion of *positional goods* and empirical literature on inequality. We think that this pairing can help explain the reasoning behind Nussbaum's and Anderson's intuitions—and clarify our reasons for accepting the negative thesis, by showing *why* inequalities are sometimes important, since they can push people below the absolute threshold of sufficiency, and *when* this is (and is not) the case.

Importantly, using the capability framework to clarify this connection comes with a set of built-in advantages. Thus, in a crucial way, constructing an account of sufficiency from within the framework of the capability approach means that one has *already* engaged with significant empirical insights on how different obstacles that people face may affect their opportunities to function in central areas of human life. This is because the capability approach, unlike other, less interdisciplinary frameworks for evaluating social justice, is to a large extent developed in connection with and evolves in constant interaction with empirical observations and measurements of the way in which capabilities interrelate and people's opportunities are shaped. Which specific empirical data are necessary for a capabilitarian evaluation are, as mentioned, dependent on the nature of the task at hand. When using the framework for development studies, for example, knowledge about how capabilities are shaped and affected by cultural norms, climate, political circumstances, and geography will be important. When using the framework for evaluating social justice, on the other hand, it will be especially important to know how the levels of central capabilities – those that are important from a justice point-of-view – are determined. Especially, it will be important to know how the categories interrelate. And doing so, from within a capabilitarian framework, will entail looking at empirically informed literature that seeks to understand this link.

With this perspective in mind, one might look to the literature on how health is affected by people's social standing. Michael Marmot, for example, shows on the grounds of extensive studies that people's health; their chances of succumbing to heart diseases, cancer, strokes, and several other health related issues, are to a significant degree influenced by their opportunities for social participation and autonomy *compared to their co-citizens*. In other words, inequalities in societal status and autonomy affect individuals' absolute levels of health (Marmot 2004). Or in our terms, unequal levels of capabilities related to fundamental interests of a social being brings about *insufficiencies* in capabilities related to biological and physical human needs. In a similar spirit, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett argue that economic inequalities – and especially, through their effect on individual perceptions of their place in the social hierarchy (“how inequality gets under the skin”) – affect a broad range of societal issues such as life expectancy, violence, and mental health negatively (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). Again, then, unequal levels of capabilities related to fundamental interests of a social being lead to people experiencing insufficiencies in other capability categories. If we care about people having *enough* of certain capabilities, then, there are still good reasons to worry about inequalities - but because inequalities in certain capabilities can lead to insufficiencies in others. And in other cases, because distributions are akin to zero-sum games, in which one person getting more of a certain capability necessarily means that the value of someone else's holding decreases. In both cases, one can say that the capability has *positional* aspects (although, we will distinguish between the two manners in which they are positional below - as quasi-positional and positional, respectively).

Positional goods are ones for which the absolute value of the good is affected by how much one has relative to others (Brighouse & Swift 2006, 472). Consequently, large inequalities



in the distribution of a good which is entirely positional will result in the worst-off group being below the threshold of sufficiency with respect to its value, regardless of how much they have in absolute terms. In almost all cases, individual capabilities have some positional aspects meaning that an unequal distribution will somehow affect people's absolute level of one or more other capabilities. The presence of positional aspects, therefore, matters greatly for how specific capability thresholds should be understood. To see how this works, we now turn to the three categories of central capabilities.

Generally, *capabilities related to fundamental interests of a social being* have strong positional aspects, meaning that one's relative place in the distribution has a large impact on one's absolute capabilities to succeed. This, as mentioned in the quote by Nussbaum above, is the case for voting, but it also seems to be the case for other freedoms, whose value is indirectly determined by others. Partly, this is due to the diminished capability in absolute terms of actually enjoying the freedom, but also it is because of the inherent symbolic value. Thus, for example, giving one group better capabilities for practicing their religion freely or for non-discrimination inevitably carries a message of disrespect and inferiority of status towards those left behind. It leaves them with insufficient capabilities of the relevant kind. In the same vein, it seems plausible that societal status—also in itself—be understood as a capability with strong positional aspects. This seems to be Anderson's point when she claims that letting one group enjoy a higher level of capabilities for societal status than others necessarily leaves the lower placed individuals to "bow and scrape before others or represent themselves as inferior to others as a condition of having their claim heard" (1999, 313). In other words, the problem is that a lower status conveys a message of lesser worth in absolute terms. And this message is disrespectful, since treating one group as having less worth is failing to respond to their humanity with impartiality and failing to

respond properly to the equal importance of the success of each human life (Frankfurt 1997). Finally, the feeling that accompanies it is, *ceteris paribus*, a serious threat to one's self-respect. Such circumstances would hinder any normal person severely in her pursuit of a flourishing life, and, thus, a relatively low status brings her below the absolute threshold. It is worth noting that this formulation avoids one line of criticism levelled against Nussbaum's list of central capabilities; namely that it cannot explain why we should aim for an equal set of basic liberties (Richardson 2006, 450-451). Highlighting the positional aspect inherent in this type of capability, tells us why.

As mentioned, most goods have some positional aspect, but capabilities related to the fundamental interests of a social being are special in this sense due to their intrinsically positional and relational qualities—they are essentially connected to people's relations to others and their capabilities to participate in and influence collective projects. We shall therefore take the capabilities related to the fundamental interests of a social being to be *positional capabilities*. In these cases, what may seem like a problematic inequality above the threshold—and hence seemingly in accordance with the negative thesis—should actually be viewed as an instance of insufficiency due to the positional mechanisms involved, and thus would be condemned by the positive thesis. Accordingly, for everyone to have a sufficient level of capabilities within this category of capability, the distribution must be more or less equal. Recall, however, that we are interested here only in central capabilities (regardless, as discussed, of how centrality is to be determined) and thus we should not worry about securing equality in non-central capabilities even when they have strong positional aspects.

With respect to the other categories of capabilities, however, it seems more reasonable that distributional procedures ought to be designed so that everyone acquires a decent absolute

level of the capability in question, and that relative positions do not matter. This is generally true for capabilities that are *not* intrinsically positional. Neither of the two former categories of capabilities are intrinsically positional in the same sense as capabilities related to fundamental interests of a social being. Capabilities in the first category—that is, *capabilities related to biological and physical human needs*—such as health, housing, or nutrition are like this. It is not in itself a concern of justice that someone is more capable than others in these areas as long as everyone fares well enough. Certainly, everyone needs *some* level of these capabilities. But it seems wrong to say that people need *equal* levels of such capabilities to be able to lead dignified or reasonably successful lives. For example, one is not relevantly obstructed in a way that is problematic from the point of view of justice simply because one person has less perfectly enhanced health than others. Everyone having an equal chance of a successful life surely entails that people must have the capabilities for obtaining a decent and sufficient level of health, but it seems far too demanding to claim that everyone needs *equal* capabilities in order for justice to be fulfilled. That is, although deficiencies in health are critical, relative differences in individual health-functioning need not be. We shall therefore call the capabilities in this category, *non-positional capabilities*. Inequalities in health, for example, are often thought to be unjust and this may, one might think, serve as a counterexample to our account. However, our account of capability sufficiency can accommodate this in three ways. First, inequalities in health may affect people's autonomy, social status, or self-respect and, thus, give rise to insufficiencies in other positional capabilities (if, for example, people of comparatively good health are met with a higher social status). Second, even if inequalities in health do not necessarily lead to insufficiencies in positional capabilities, they will often *coincide* with and be general symptoms of such insufficiencies since social disadvantages tend to cluster (Wolff and de-Shalit 2007, 122-

123; Marmot 2004, 14-15). This grounds the importance of health functioning measures such as life-expectancy in the Human Development Index and how it may play a significant role as a valid proxy for *identifying* the worse-off. Perceived in this way, health inequalities are worrisome—although not necessarily incidences of insufficiencies in themselves—because they highlight some societal groups that are clearly insufficiently well-off. This is aptly illustrated by Marmot’s famous account a subway ride from central Washington D.C. to Montgomery County, Maryland, on which life-expectancy rises a year and a half for every mile (Marmot 2004, 2).

This leads to a third and final reason to care about health inequality. In some cases, what are seemingly examples of *only* inequalities in health are *actually* insufficiencies. Often critics of sufficientarianism underestimate the demandingness of the relevant threshold of biological and physical needs. On our own account, as we put it elsewhere, “if some faces an average life span of 55 years (as is the case, for example, in Malawi), they are clearly insufficiently well-off and under duress—regardless of the quality of their relations to other people” (Axelsen & Nielsen 2015, 421). So, regarding health capabilities and other capabilities related to biological and physical human needs *seen in isolation* only a sufficient—and not equal—level is required by justice. Equality, on the contrary, is merely instrumentally valuable due to the relational intertwinement between these capabilities and capabilities with strong positional aspects. In policy-making, then, these aspects must be kept apart if justice is to be attained.

The second category of capabilities—*related to fundamental interests of a human agent*—is special. Like the biological and physical capabilities, the capabilities in this category such as affiliation, educational competence, critical reflection and normative evaluation are not intrinsically positional. That is, in contrast to capabilities related to fundamental interest of a

social being it is not true for these capabilities that whenever one person gets more capability, others are made worse off in an absolute sense. Consequently, sufficiency of capabilities related to fundamental interests of a human agent does not per se require an equal distribution for justice to be fulfilled. It is perfectly legitimate, for example, to hold that a society is sufficiently just when all have some reasonable level of education, a decent ground for affiliation, critical reflection and evaluation and so forth. These capabilities revolve around the importance of individual human autonomy—the ability to think critically, to evaluate normatively, and to set and pursue valuable goals for oneself—and as defenders of the value of autonomy have rightfully argued, sufficiency is the most plausible distributive ideal for such a value (Raz 1986; Dworkin 1988; Blake 2001, Nielsen 2015).

On the other hand, the capabilities related to the fundamental interests of a human agent differ significantly from capabilities related to biological and physical needs in terms of the type of possible obstacles that may hinder the conversion of capability into achievement. These obstacles are recognized in the capability approach literature as conversion factors (Robeyns 2005). The achievement of functionings related to biological and physical need capabilities are influenced by *personal* conversion factors that are, in a way, internal to the capability. This includes factors such as metabolism, physical condition, security etc. where having the capability (say for health functioning) basically includes these factors. On the other hand, the effective opportunity for converting human agent capabilities (such as critical reflection and affiliation) into the related achieved functionings is often potentially obstructed by *external* factors. For example, a person's opportunity for getting a meaningful job that is appropriate to her level and type of education is not only dependent on her personal capacities and acquired skills but also on competition from other human agents and social norms. Similarly, a person's opportunity for

affiliation is deeply dependent on the social milieu and cultural environment and not only her own personal capacities. In sum, although capabilities related to the fundamental interests of a human agent are not intrinsically positional, the obstacles which may delimit people's opportunity to succeed in these areas is very often externally defined and rooted in the social context. In both examples, then, access to *some of the* important functionings to which these capabilities are key is determined by the capability levels of others, and are, thus, partly positional. In other words, their *value* is often (at least partly) determined by how they are linked to other capabilities. We shall therefore call these *quasi-positional capabilities*.

Based on this analysis of how to understand the distributional logics of the different types of capabilities, the question of how to obtain sufficientarian justice within this pluralist capability framework needs to be addressed. We suggest that justice as capability sufficiency entails the following requirements:

- (i) *Indexing process*: Any theory, social assessment or political arrangement that adhere to social justice should concentrate (only) on capabilities that are centrally important for people's lives as opposed to maximizing or equalizing preference satisfaction, welfare, or wealth. Although subjective preferences are in themselves not relevant for the selection of capabilities, any legitimate indexing should safeguard people's influence over the selection process, due to the intrinsic importance of the capability of personal choice.
- (ii) *Capability typology*: Any index of capabilities relevant for social justice would include three distinct categories of central capabilities: (1) *Capabilities related to biological and physical human needs*; (2) *Capabilities related to fundamental interests of a human agent*; and (3) *Capabilities related to fundamental interests of a*

- social being*. For justice to be fulfilled, a political arrangement must be sensitive to the different distributional logics of the distinct types of central capabilities.
- (iii) *Non-positional logic*: The first category of capabilities are non-positional—their absolute value for a particular person is independent of what other people have—and thus justice requires (only) that everyone is secured a decent level of all such capabilities (health, housing, security etc.). Importantly, however, their interconnection with capabilities with positional aspects may, nonetheless, require avoiding great inequalities in their distribution.
  - (iv) *Positional logic*: The third category is positional—that is, the absolute value of these capabilities depends on other people’s capabilities—and thus justice requires that everyone enjoys a more or less equal share of these capabilities (political influence, societal status etc.).
  - (v) *Quasi-positional logic*: The second category is quasi-positional—that is, these capabilities are not intrinsically positional, but important related functionings often involve obstacles from external social conversion factors with positional logics. In regards to these capabilities, justice requires that everyone is secured a sufficient level of all such capabilities (critical reflection, education, affiliation etc.). And, moreover, that no person is obstructed from converting these capabilities to their relevant achievements due to pressure from external factors.

In the preceding sections, we have reformulated sufficientarian social justice enlightened by an overall typology of central capabilities. In this section, we have argued that bringing people above the threshold within a capability category may imply either an equal distribution or

bringing everyone above an absolute threshold and ignoring inequalities beyond this threshold, depending on the type of capability. More specifically, it depends on the empirical interconnections in play and whether the distribution of the capability is governed by positional logics. If this is the case, a person's relative capability level determines their absolute level, and, thus, dictates whether they are sufficiently well-off. In other words, we affirm the negative thesis; that once people have sufficient capabilities in all these areas, inequalities are irrelevant to social justice. This pluralist view, we claim, seems in tune with how the requirements for living a flourishing life are normally judged, and joining it with the notion of positional goods gives intuitively appealing reasons for accepting the negative thesis for capabilityarians who hold that the human good is multifaceted.

## **Conclusion**

Although the capability approach encompasses several relatively comprehensive and innovative accounts of social justice, most are still either undecided or underdeveloped when it comes to the issue of distributive justice. In this paper, we have outlined the sufficiency principle within a capabilityarian framework of social justice revolving around a categorization of central human capabilities that we believe most capabilityarians would accept. We have shown how the sufficiency principle should be interpreted when informed by the inherent pluralism entailed in the capability approach and argued that this pluralism serves as an argument for sufficiency; not against it. Furthermore, we have argued that what effectively determines the threshold of sufficiency varies according to the distributional logics within each category of capability, depending on the presence or absence of positional aspects for that particular capability. In other words, whereas social justice in regards to non-positional and quasi-positional capabilities



requires securing an adequate level for everyone, and protecting people from external pressure on their opportunity to succeed, social justice in regard to positional capabilities requires an equal distribution, but for *sufficientarian* (not egalitarian) reasons. This reasoning grounds the acceptance of *the negative thesis* of sufficientarianism. We conclude that this account of capability sufficiency shows much promise towards closing one of the central gaps still remaining in the development of the capability approach within the field of social justice.

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<sup>i</sup> And indeed, poor people often choose taste and variation over calories even when malnourished, and in desperate need of calories. See Banerjee, and Duflo (2011, ch. 2).

<sup>ii</sup> Although, Anderson's preferred ideal is egalitarian in the sense that it claims we should aim for a society of *equals*, this is entirely compatible with saying that everyone should have enough *distributively* and be treated with a high level of respect (although not necessarily be treated in the same way).