

Independent or Complementary? On the Role of Crisp's Sufficiency Principle in Contemporary Distributive Justice

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Abstract. Sufficiencyarianism is one of the most influential approaches in contemporary distributive justice, and Crisp's version is generally regarded as the most promising among them. This paper aims to explore whether, under today's global political and economic circumstances, Crispian sufficiencyarianism can serve as a feasible normative framework for distributive justice. It also asks whether such a framework can safeguard the "priority" of groups below the threshold without relying on other distributive principles such as egalitarianism. Firstly, drawing on the theory of needs, an inherently coherent inclusion criterion for the Crispian threshold is established. Subsequently, an examination of practical experiences in the field of aid and development suggests that the root causes of poverty cannot be truly revealed, if the dis-empowerment of groups below the threshold by those above it is ignored. Thus, an intrinsic tension arises between the "priority" and "independence" of the threshold. Finally, it can be concluded that Crisp's version of sufficiencyarianism can hardly be justified if it is divorced from egalitarian goals: without fundamental institutional reforms, simply setting a threshold to compensate the poor is both inefficient and unsustainable.

Keywords: Roger Crisp, sufficiencyarianism, distributive justice, threshold, global poverty

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, the aspiration for sufficiency for all, sufficiencyarianism, has been reflected in contemporary distributive justice and quickly gained prominence [1]. Sufficiencyarianism aims to ensure that everyone lives a decent life, especially amid widespread remedial deprivation. Sufficiencyarians argue that justice requires providing everyone with enough of certain goods to meet their basic needs, but not equality for goods beyond the threshold [2].

This paper intends to examine whether Crisp's version of sufficiencyarianism [3] can be applied under non-ideal circumstances. Compared with the earliest defense of sufficiencyarianism by Frankfurt [2], Crisp's version does not require maximizing the number of people who reach or exceed a certain threshold of sufficiency. Instead, it demands that "priority" be absolutely assigned to those who have not yet reached the threshold, with reference to both the magnitude of benefits and the number of recipients [3].

First, this paper will analyze whether Crispian sufficiencyarianism's threshold criterion can be clarified, such that the "impartial spectator" [3] is moved to compassion solely for those below it.

Second, it is necessary to explore whether a clear dichotomy between those above and below the threshold is practicable in today's cosmopolitan community, and thus whether even inequalities above the threshold must arouse our normative concern. Furthermore, the question arises whether Crispian sufficientarianism can supplement, or even replace, the role of egalitarianism in distributive justice.

2. Thresholds of sufficiency: which needs should be considered?

This section will examine Crispian sufficientarianism's threshold criterion. The threshold can be seen as a set of goods or needs essential for citizens to have a decent life [4], which are of "universal importance." The threshold also sets minimum levels for its goods, protecting individuals against harms, such as poverty and deprivation. The needs included in the Crispian sufficiency threshold will be analyzed to ensure that its criteria are intrinsically coherent.

2.1. The delineation of basic needs and thresholds

First, it is crucial to highlight that basic needs are "universally important" for human beings, and thus should be included in the threshold.

There are two ways to interpret necessary needs. The first is to regard needs as the most basic guarantee for life [5]. The second views needs as the fulfillment of potential: they shape normative subjects, and provide the conditions necessary for free choice [6].

On this basis, two lists of needs can be formulated. The first list only includes needs for safeguarding physical integrity, which can be "assembled" using a bottom-up thinking approach [4,5]. The claim of this set of needs represents a "non-instrumental" perspective: meeting them is necessary to avoid direct or potential human rights violations [5].

In contrast, the (negative) goal of safeguarding physical integrity entails a series of derived goals, which must be identified through top-down thinking. For example, Beitz proposes that the two most important derived goals are the elimination of poverty and political self-determination, which makes such list more controversial. Political self-determination involves whether interpersonal comparison should be incorporated into the necessity dimension [7].

The above discussion shows that the threshold is generally "personalized" when its scope is considered, meaning it is regarded as a reflection of human basic needs. Therefore, different interpretations of needs lead to fluctuations in the threshold. The upper and lower bounds of this fluctuation may serve to define the threshold.

The highest threshold requires a "perfectly just" society [4]. In such a society, sufficientarianism gives greater weight to individual's subjective sense of satiety [2]. However, this threshold may be too high: few economic goods can satisfy people with only a small quantity, and few people are satisfied with all goods. Therefore, nearly all societies fall short of this satisfaction standard. It can thus be inferred that enabling people to attain or approach satiety cannot serve as a distributive criterion with practical guidance [8]. In contrast, minimum needs correspond to the elements necessary for maintaining "physical integrity," which are essential for human survival and reproduction.

Between the upper and lower bounds lies the realization of individual agency, which corresponds to a "basically just" society [4] as advocated by Crispian sufficientarianism. The scope of needs in such a society is "intermediate": above the line of minimum but well below the line of satiety [8]. According to Axelsen and Nielsen, it reflects the desire for individual freedom, being free from duress in all central areas of life, rather than merely achieving superior status in aggregate measures

like utility or welfare. “Being free from duress” means that individuals face no significant pressures that hinder their success in any central areas, allowing them to fully enjoy substantive human rights [9].

2.2. The practicability of the crispian threshold

Given the realities of life in a resource-scarce society, the three thresholds mentioned above can be compared: the first is excessively high and thus “unattainable,” while the second is excessively low and thus “undesirable.” The criteria of the third threshold type, namely the Crispian threshold, warrant primary consideration.

Crisp describes sufficiency as “eighty years of high-quality life on this planet” [3]. Literally, this state is “inferior to some but superior to others” [8], and it is most likely to translate into real-life scenarios.

The practicability of the Crispian threshold stems from two inherent factors. First, the Crispian threshold is “self-limiting.” What Crisp emphasizes here is compassion, an innate and universal perception of others’ suffering from infancy onward [8]. According to Shields’ “shift thesis,” once people obtain sufficient security, the marginal reasons for further benefiting them decline sharply, and we consequently tend to stop providing additional benefits [10].

Second, Crisp’s version is in line with human nature. Because the fulfillment of potential, as a long-term life goal, is formulated based on the diverse characteristics of individuals in real life. The Crispian threshold allows multiple pathways for realizing core values, thus it only stipulates “objectivity itself”. Justice, in this view, demands giving all people specific goods in the core areas of life, which are valuable from any perspective [9]. If so, a just society in Crisp’s idea still retains the goal of a plurality of goods above the threshold, enabling its members to choose among multiple schemes for realizing life values. In short, the key for Crispian sufficientarianism is to determine its position within non-ideal societies.

3. Realizing thresholds: is it possible to disregard inequalities above the threshold level?

The previous section argued that Crisp’s version of sufficientarianism can be interpreted as a reality-oriented doctrine. However, Crispian sufficientarianism also reflects “priority”: once beyond the threshold, there is no further reason to prioritize those worse off [11]. In other words, if this “negative proposition” holds, sufficientarianism will have grounds to replace the current standards of distributive justice [3]. Therefore, this section will draw on empirical evidence from the aid and development field to explore the real-world effect of “priority,” assessing whether Crispian sufficientarianism remains practical and sustainable when separated from egalitarian goals.

3.1. The international community’s experience in efforts to reduce poverty

Currently, achieving “freedom from poverty” in the developing world requires defining a poverty line and providing resources to the corresponding population [12]. This is more difficult than achieving “freedom from deprivation” guided by Crispian sufficientarianism. Thus, in terms of economic income, the most common “common good”, the international community’s approach aligns with sufficientarian logic.

However, direct aid targeting the poor does not seem to proceed as smoothly as it appears. NGOs with extensive experience in community projects generally argue that “welfarist” interventions targeting material poverty rarely enable beneficiaries to permanently escape extreme poverty [12].

First, consider a society with the poor and the deprived. Direct aid may produce “disproportionate” benefits: those in power gain the most, rather than the vulnerable groups meant to receive attention [13]. It may also lead to issues like low governance effectiveness and corruption, akin to “resource curse,” further limiting the amount and proportion of aid reaching the poorest groups [14]. Next, an instructive empirical case is the international community’s commitment to aiding the poor and the deprived. Under the current international situation, there is no direct and efficient mechanism to ensure that aid funds from wealthy countries reach poor countries regularly. Instead, short-term political interests of developed countries largely determine whether such funding occurs [12]. Therefore, the failure of such attempts provides a key insight: when direct aid targets only those below the threshold and neglects those above it, new poverty and deprivation continue to arise like tides.

Addressing poverty requires a systematic understanding. That is, poverty originates from deprivation, which in turn stems from oppressive power structures. Therefore, addressing poverty and deprivation is not the first step, but the last consideration.

In the causal analysis of poverty, the flaws in institutional design are very obvious. For example, the most typical famines are systematic in nature. Although individual market actors cannot predict the consequences of their profit-seeking behaviors, a robust socio-economic system can prevent food shortages. Pogge points out that the evil of poverty today lies in the fact that societal elites have intentionally designed and imposed unjust supranational institutional arrangements, which have created over half of the world’s extremely poor. Yet this outcome, though foreseeable, was not prevented [15].

In other words, the unequal power structure is the root cause of creating and exacerbating poverty. Regardless of personal views on the effectiveness of current poverty-elimination efforts, it remains an undeniable fact that billions of people still live in extreme poverty [16].

3.2. Limitations in the application of the crispian threshold

As discussed, institutional analysis, the latest approach to understanding poverty, extends beyond developed countries. Instead, this approach requires a broader scope of analysis. Accordingly, these considerations cast doubt on the global practicability of the Crispian threshold, suggesting it may apply only to redistribution within developed countries and may be difficult to implement in developing ones.

Against the backdrop of globalization, the evolution of the international relations has challenged traditional moral concepts confined to national borders, as more transnational actors (i.e. MNCs and WTO) engage in domestic affairs of less developed countries. Societal elites, who dominate those transnational actors, participate frequently in intergovernmental negotiations, and benefit greatly from crafting supranational regulations favorable to themselves. Conversely, due to the costs of political participation, the general public is excluded and lack a voice. At the same time, this passivity in rule-making has inevitably trapped more than half of the global population in a cycle of poverty. They are excluded from the beneficiaries of the globalized economy and thus cannot proportionally share in its economic growth [15]. Evidently, the dominant elites can expand their income by establishing rules, then use this income to further influence rule-making, thereby forming a power-money cycle.

Worse still, most groups capable of challenging the status of societal elites remain silent on issues of inequality and poverty. Although contemporary moral theories stress that citizens of democratic countries have obligations to intervene in poverty caused by unjust governance in underdeveloped countries, they still allow considerable discretion in how such obligations are fulfilled. These

citizens are therefore left free to choose to take as little action as possible to alleviate their own burdens. In contrast, more radical views advocate for a complete transformation of the current unjust supranational system, rather than merely mitigating its harms or providing minor compensation to those whose rights have been violated [15].

In response to this, since 1980s, some large-scale NGOs with rich experience have recognized the core issues leading to poverty and thus begun targeting key institutional factors. For example, they have increasingly collaborated with local communities, re-empowered the poor through intervention measures, and carried out advocacy and lobbying activities. At present, a preliminary consensus on poverty has been reached among development workers and scholars: institutional reform is needed to eliminate poverty [12].

Therefore, the renewed understanding of poverty implies a re-established causal order. That is, inequalities in interpersonal relationships shape the threshold, rather than the threshold existing independently of equal (or unequal) relationships. Regrettably, like other sufficientarians, Crisp places greater emphasis on the “independence” of the threshold. Crisp and his followers regard sufficientarianism and egalitarianism as opposites, arguing that equality itself has no intrinsic value, and a more equal distribution is a natural result of sufficiency. This “pre-distributive” view is generally accepted among sufficientarian theorists, according to which the sufficiency threshold is defined independently of equality or other distributive values [8].

It can thus be seen that Crisp’s version of sufficientarianism still adopts a flawed reasoning method. If a better way to act exists, such as systematically preventing poverty by establishing a supranational security system and promoting institutional reform, then Crisp’s sufficientarian argument, which demonstrates the effectiveness of poverty reduction through lowering of poverty rates [17], will not hold. At best, it represents only a second-best alternative. Under the current system, giving priority to compensating the poor by defining a threshold is neither cost-effective nor sustainable [15]. As long as individuals continue to live in severe poverty “produced” by the current global order, the injustice of this alternative is fully exposed [18].

Therefore, the threshold is merely an indicator, not a goal. In other words, to bring everyone up to the threshold, sufficientarians should instead prioritize institutional equality, in order to achieve self-sufficiency in capabilities for all. This indicates that under non-ideal circumstances, if Crisp seeks to uphold the “priority” of those below the threshold, he should abandon the threshold’s “independence” and align with egalitarian goals, thereby eliminating fundamental obstacles faced by the insufficient.

4. Conclusion

This paper has illustrated a potential paradox faced by Crisp’s version of sufficientarianism, namely the conflict between the threshold’s “independence” and “priority”. The “priority” of the threshold ensures those in deprivation, whose quantity of a certain type of goods is below the benchmark, are given absolutely distributional precedence. The goal is to help them return to a state above the threshold. Whilst the “independence” of the threshold means that the sufficiency threshold possesses intrinsic value, so its criteria exist independently of distributive principles such as equality. It has been noted that, given the current situation of global institutional inequality, a conflict exists between the principles of “independence” and “priority.”

Therefore, Crispian sufficientarianism appears insufficient to independently guide global practices of poverty elimination. The perspective of institutional equality, however, helps remedy this deficiency by addressing inequalities in power structures. As a consequence, the “setting a

threshold” approach can serve as an auxiliary tool or indicator, helping scholars and development workers “detect” potential unequal power structures.

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