

Sufficiency

One day, Mr Keuner is asked what he thinks of sufficiency. "Well," replies Mr Keuner, "I can't say I'm too convinced. Why should I suddenly forgo something that I never even wanted in the first place?"
(in acknowledgement to Berthold Brecht)

The term "sufficiency" comes from the Latin "sufficere", meaning "to suffice", "to be enough". The concept is often associated with moderation or adequacy. It is an approach which asks the question: How much do we need for a good life? And how much is superfluous? The idea behind these questions is to reduce consumption of raw materials and energy as far as possible by reducing the demand for goods and services, especially those requiring high levels of resource use.

The central question is, "which needs have to be met to enable a good life?". People's individual needs should be satisfied – but it is not just material needs that should be taken into consideration. This approach takes a critical look at the process whereby new needs are constantly created by technological developments and advertising. The creation of new needs could probably go on forever. For instance, ten years ago no one felt the need for a smartphone. Today, many people can barely live without one. However, this endless stream of new needs occurs in a finite world, limited by the finite availability of natural resources. According to the sufficiency approach, a meaningful life does not consist in chasing after every new need that is created, or being constantly driven by new desires. Rather than a constant quest for novelty, it lies in the ability to consciously forgo something, to wait for things, to take pleasure in what we have, cultivating our relationship with the world as it is and satisfying needs without having to consume.

As a result, unlike efficiency and consistency, sufficiency does not call for a change in how things are produced, but rather in our consumption habits. It targets needs, with the primary goal of bringing about lifestyle changes, and ultimately a cultural transformation in our society.

Steps towards sufficiency can be varied in scope. Some require nothing more than a minor change in our behaviour, e.g. borrowing a tool from neighbours instead of buying one. Others have a deeper impact on our lifestyle, such as forgoing air travel and using slower forms of transportation instead. Sufficiency begins with corrected habits, continues in changes in behaviour, and can go as far as changes in lifestyle and economic structures.

Although at first glance it appears to be a highly individual approach ("Do I really need yet another new mobile phone?"), a closer look reveals that the sufficiency approach can be adopted on many different levels. Of course, every individual can take steps towards sufficiency. These include consuming energy sparingly, eating local produce, eating less meat or avoiding animal products altogether, taking fewer holidays abroad, travelling by bicycle, rail and bus, and so on. However, our consumption habits and lifestyles are culturally and institutionally shaped. Companies can design products with sufficiency values in mind, taking into account their environmental safety, durability and reparability. Governments too can follow a resource-saving sufficiency policy by introducing speed limits on motorways or subsidising local public transport. To this end, a general consensus within society is needed: How do we want to live? Which essential commodities do we want to preserve?

Many people are quick to equate sufficiency with frugality or austerity. However, aside from the ecological dimension, sufficiency also asks the question of whether a steady accumulation of consumer goods, perceived novelty and entertainment actually makes us happier. Advocates of the approach, such as Niko Paech, describe sufficiency not as an act of renunciation, but rather as a process of decluttering, of discarding the excess luggage of prosperity. For someone who is being crushed by an avalanche of self-fulfillment choices and repeatedly persuaded that they need even more, it is not a question of renunciation, but of freedom from the stress of constant purchasing decisions, sensory overload, meaninglessness and cumbersome possessions which cost money, time, space and ecological resources.

Sufficiency need not be perceived as a restriction. If we were to devote less of our attention to buying and using things, might we not have more time for the things that are truly important in our lives?

Sources:

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