

Justice, Thresholds, and the Three Claims of Sufficientarianism*

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I. INTRODUCTION

ACCORDING to sufficientarianism, justice requires that everyone has enough.¹ This view has attracted considerable philosophical and societal support, and appeals to widely held intuitions about social policy and institutional design, such as that the state should meet the basic needs and ensure the basic freedoms of its citizens, and that it should provide them with sufficient levels of healthcare, education, safety, and other goods.² And yet sufficientarianism has been subjected to sustained criticism.³ This weakens the prospects for sufficientarianism in theories of distributive justice. And it puts pressure on widespread sufficientarian policies such as poverty-relief programmes. In light of this, this article revisits sufficientarianism and reappraises the standard critiques against it.

Ever since Paula Casal's 2007 canonical article on sufficientarianism, there has been a remarkable level of agreement among proponents and critics about how

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¹See Frankfurt 1987; Casal 2007; Shields 2012.

²For egalitarianism and sufficiency thresholds, see Waldron 1986; Nagel 1991; Rawls 2001; Temkin 2003a; O'Neill 2008; Rondel 2016; Scanlon 2018. For prioritarianism and sufficiency thresholds, see Brown 2005, 2007; Benbaji 2006. For luck egalitarianism and sufficiency thresholds, see Barry 2006; Segall 2010. For relational egalitarianism and sufficiency thresholds, see Anderson 1999, pp. 318–19; 2008, pp. 265–6. For libertarianism and sufficiency thresholds, see Hayek 2001, pp. 124–5; Freiman 2012; Wendt 2019. For republicanism and sufficiency thresholds, see Pettit 2012; Peterson 2020. Sufficientarianism is also prominent in social policy and institutional design. For example, on sufficiency thresholds in healthcare, see Buchanan 1984; Fabre 2006; Powers and Faden 2006; Alvarez 2007; Ram-Tiktin 2012. On sufficiency thresholds in education, see White 1994, 2016; Curren 1995; Gutmann 2001; Anderson 2007; Satz 2007; Cudd 2015; Shields 2015; Tooley 2017. On sufficiency thresholds in climate ethics and intergenerational justice, see Shue 1993; Rawls 2001, pp. 159–60; Page 2007; Rendall 2011.

³I elaborate on those objections in Section IV.

the view must be characterized.⁴ Whether it is defended or criticized, sufficientarianism is defined as combining two out of three sufficientarian theses. These are the *positive thesis* that it is morally valuable to have enough; and either the *negative thesis*, which states that once people have enough, no further distributive criteria apply, or the *shift thesis*, which states that once they have enough, there is a shift in our reasons for benefiting them further.⁵ However, this characterization of sufficientarianism suffers from two flaws. First, it fails to sufficiently appreciate both the distinctiveness and the non-distinctiveness of sufficientarianism as a distributive principle. Second, it leaves sufficientarianism unnecessarily vulnerable to common objections. For these reasons, sufficientarianism is best understood and defended by characterizing it along different lines.

In this article, I propose a novel characterization of sufficientarianism. In a nutshell, sufficientarianism says that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits below some threshold over benefits above that threshold. More precisely, sufficientarianism combines three claims: (1) a *priority claim* that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits in certain ranges over benefits in other ranges; (2) a *continuum claim* that at least two of those ranges are on one continuum; and (3) a *deficiency claim* that the lower a range on a continuum, the more priority it has.

This novel characterization of sufficientarianism sheds new light on two long-standing philosophical debates. The first debate concerns the distinctiveness of sufficientarianism as a distributive principle. For instance, sufficientarianism shares a commitment to the priority claim with some important rival views. This similarity does not come to the surface if sufficientarianism is defined by drawing on the traditional sufficientarian theses. This issue concerning when sufficientarianism is *not* distinctive from its rivals is pivotal for the second debate, that about the common objections to sufficientarianism. Many of those objections say, in one way or another, that sufficientarianism fetishizes thresholds. However, although that is said almost exclusively about sufficientarianism, I will argue that such fetishism arises because of the priority claim. But many non-sufficientarian views also endorse this claim. By examining how such views endorse the priority claim, yet avoid worries about fetishism, we can recast sufficientarianism in a different light. In particular, sufficientarians can argue that sufficiency thresholds are part of the most plausible conception of justice, even if such thresholds are not grounded in certain facts about the world or human nature.

I develop and defend my characterization of sufficientarianism as follows. In Section II, I argue that sufficientarianism combines the continuum claim, the priority claim, and the deficiency claim. In Section III, I discuss three objections

⁴For example, see Casal 2007; Huseby 2010, 2019; Shields 2012, 2019; Axelsen and Nielsen 2015; Segall 2016; Fourie and Rid 2017.

⁵More accurately, the negative thesis is a specification of the shift thesis. I leave that issue aside here. See Shields 2017, p. 211.

to this characterization. In Section IV, I introduce five common objections to sufficientarianism. I then defend sufficientarianism in the subsequent sections: Section V deals with objections concerning indifference, absolutism, and responsibility, Section VI with the no-threshold objection, and Section VII with the arbitrariness objection. In Section VIII, I conclude by setting out the implications for sufficientarian theories of distributive justice.

II. THE THREE CLAIMS OF SUFFICIENTARIANISM

I will refer to the continuum claim, the priority claim, and the deficiency claim as the ‘three claims of sufficientarianism’. In the following two sections, I offer three reasons for why these claims are necessary and sufficient to define sufficientarianism. First, everyone who defends a sufficiency threshold is committed to those claims. Second, all non-sufficientarian views reject at least one of those claims. Third, these claims are entailed by the traditional sufficientarian theses.

Thresholds play a pivotal role in sufficientarianism. However, sufficientarianism is commonly defined without examining its thresholds. To illustrate, Harry Frankfurt famously argued that someone has enough when that person ‘is content, or that it is reasonable for him to be content, with having no more money than he has’,⁶ and that ‘if everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others’.⁷ Traditionally, Frankfurt’s view has been interpreted as saying that it is morally valuable to have an amount of money that someone is content with or should be content with (‘positive thesis’), and that once people have that amount of money, no further distributive criteria apply (‘negative thesis’).⁸ However, this characterization of Frankfurt’s view pays little attention to the threshold it entails. But precisely because Frankfurt’s sufficientarian view predates the introduction of the traditional sufficientarian theses, his writing is particularly suited to recharacterizing sufficientarianism. I will therefore draw on his account in what follows.

Frankfurt says that it is important that people have enough money.⁹ This implies that there is a threshold demarcating two ranges of amounts of money on a single continuum of possible amounts of money.¹⁰ One range encompasses the amounts of money with which someone is or should be content. The other range encompasses the amounts of money with which someone is not or should not be

⁶Frankfurt 1987, p. 37.

⁷Ibid., p. 21.

⁸E.g. Casal 2007, pp. 298–9.

⁹Of course, sufficientarians can draw on other metrics as well. For an overview of metrics defended by sufficientarians, see Huseby 2019.

¹⁰I distinguish the ‘continuum’ from the ‘metric of justice’. The metric of justice is the thing that is distributed, whereas the continuum indicates the different levels of that metric that people can have. For example, if the metric is ‘welfare’, then the continuum contains the possible welfare levels someone can have.

content. The fact that those ranges are on one continuum gives us the first claim that sufficientarians must endorse:

The continuum claim. At least two of the ranges that are relevant from the standpoint of justice are on one continuum.¹¹

The continuum claim is not unique to sufficientarianism, because other views could endorse it on purely instrumental grounds. For example, strict egalitarianism holds that the overall moral value of changes in the distribution of the metric of justice is a function of whether such changes increase or decrease distributive equality. And prioritarianism holds that the moral value of benefits for an individual is greater the lower their current level and the greater the size of the benefit as measured by the relevant metric. Such views could say that it is instrumentally valuable for people to move towards a specific range on a continuum, namely if that optimally promotes equality or priority.

Unlike egalitarianism and prioritarianism, however, sufficientarianism distinguishes between different ranges *on non-instrumental grounds*.¹² For instance, Frankfurt says that benefits for people who should not be content with the amount of money they have matter more than benefits for people who should be content with what they have. More generally, benefits for people who do not have enough matter more, morally speaking, than benefits for those who have enough.

This brings us to the second claim that sufficientarians must endorse:

The priority claim. We have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits in certain ranges over benefits in other ranges.

According to sufficientarianism, whether someone has enough influences how benefits should be prioritized.¹³ Such priority can be lexical ('absolute') or non-lexical ('weighted'). Lexical priority asserts the priority of benefits in one range over benefits in another range, no matter the size of the possible

¹¹The continuum claim says that *at least two* of the ranges that are relevant from the standpoint of justice are on one continuum. This qualification is important for three reasons. First, some sufficientarians argue that sufficiency is required in more than one metric and, therefore, in more than one continuum. Second, some sufficientarians argue that sufficiency is required on one continuum, but not on another. I return to these points in Section III. Third, some sufficientarians argue that there are more than two ranges on one continuum; e.g. Benbaji 2005, 2006; Huseby 2010, 2020.

¹²On instrumental and non-instrumental sufficiency thresholds, see Shields 2012, p. 106.

¹³The priority claim does not specify exactly what it means to give people below the threshold priority. There are at least two versions of this idea. According to the first interpretation, benefits for people below the threshold have priority over benefits for people above it. According to the second interpretation, benefits that lift people above the threshold have priority over benefits for people which do not lift them above the threshold. Elsewhere, I argue that sufficientarians must commit to both those interpretations and that they should specify which of them has priority in cases of conflict (i.e. whether we should move someone over the threshold or benefit someone who is far worse off without moving them over the threshold). But the priority claim itself is also compatible with endorsing one of the interpretations while rejecting the other. For discussion, see Timmer (forthcoming), sect. V. I thank an anonymous reviewer for urging me to clarify this point.

benefits or the number of beneficiaries.¹⁴ Non-lexical priority says that giving priority to benefits in one range over benefits in another must be weighed against other concerns. For example, perhaps deficiencies must be eliminated except when they are due to someone's own fault or choice. Or such deficiencies must be eliminated unless doing so has significant levelling-down consequences above the threshold.¹⁵

The priority claim is not unique to sufficientarianism either. Consider John Rawls's theory of justice as fairness. Rawls states that social primary goods must be distributed equally, unless an unequal distribution is to everyone's advantage.¹⁶ This principle is supplemented with a system of priority between different metrics, which I will refer to as 'basic liberties', 'equal opportunity', and 'resources'. According to Rawls, equalizing basic liberties takes lexical priority over equal opportunity, which in turn takes lexical priority over fairness in the distribution of resources.

Rawls endorses the priority claim that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits in certain ranges over benefits in other ranges. But whereas sufficientarians hold that the good provided is the same in both ranges, Rawls says that the good provided is *different* in those ranges. The range(s) in the first continuum concerns basic liberties, whereas the range(s) in the second, separate continuum is concerned with equal opportunity. Finally, the range(s) in the third, separate continuum is concerned with resources. These continua do not and cannot overlap. Therefore, Rawlsian views reject the continuum claim.¹⁷ Instead, they endorse a *continua claim* that the ranges that are relevant from the standpoint of justice are on different continua. In fact, any theory of justice which says that benefits in certain metrics have priority over benefits in other metrics, such as Rawlsian views and pluralist views, endorse that claim.

Although the combination of the continuum claim and the priority claim sets sufficientarianism apart from, for example, Rawlsian views, egalitarianism, and prioritarianism, it does not yet define a distinctively sufficientarian view. For Frankfurt, lacking enough money constitutes a *deficiency*. It means that one has less than some threshold level of the relevant metric. For that reason, a full characterization of sufficientarianism should include the following:

The deficiency claim. The lower a range on a continuum, the more priority it has.

¹⁴Dale Dorsey (2008, p. 437), for example, defends lexical priority when he says that 'the state of affairs with more rather than fewer individuals obtaining the basic minimum is, no matter the arrangements below and above the minimum, [better]'. See also Frankfurt 1987, p. 31; Roemer 2004, pp. 273–4, 278–9; Page 2007, p. 11.

¹⁵For example, Christopher Freiman (2012, p. 37) suggests that 'sufficiently large gains in other values can outweigh gains in sufficiency (which receives extra weight)'.

¹⁶See Rawls 1999, p. 54. Rawls does defend some thresholds, but I will leave that aside for now. See Rawls 2001, pp. 130–1.

¹⁷More precisely, they either reject the continuum claim or they endorse it, just as strict egalitarianism or prioritarianism can endorse that claim, but deny that the ranges specified in the continuum claim are the same as those in the priority claim.

The deficiency claim says that the range that should have priority is the range *below* the threshold.¹⁸ This sets sufficientarianism apart from views which say that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits in the range *above* some threshold.¹⁹ It is certainly true that some sufficientarian views, such as those which say that the number of people above the threshold should be maximized, may have seemingly non-sufficientarian implications. For instance, if sufficiency cannot be achieved, they may prioritize benefits above the threshold over benefits below it (for example, they would benefit someone well above the threshold rather than prolong the life of a dying patient by one minute). But even then, the idea of deficiency guides the line of reasoning behind this claim. Only if people cannot get above some critical threshold should benefits in the range above that threshold have priority.

In sum, by making explicit what claims sufficientarians must endorse in virtue of defending a sufficiency threshold, we can recharacterize sufficientarianism as combining the continuum claim, the priority claim, and the deficiency claim. Sufficientarianism says that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits in certain ranges over benefits in other ranges, that at least two of those ranges are on one continuum, and that the lower a range is on a continuum, the more priority benefits in that range have.

This characterization sheds new light on the distinctiveness of sufficientarianism. Some of its rivals, such as egalitarianism and prioritarianism, endorse the continuum claim, but reject the priority claim. Others, such as Rawlsian views and certain pluralist views, endorse the priority claim, but reject the continuum claim. Yet these similarities and differences remain hidden in the traditional sufficientarian theses. Many Rawlsian and pluralist views, for example, reject all the traditional sufficientarian theses. But they *do* endorse the priority claim. This is a crucial insight. I will argue that such non-sufficientarian views are vulnerable to the same objections as sufficientarianism if those objections target the priority claim. Furthermore, this suggests that sufficientarians can recast and strengthen their view by exploring how non-sufficientarians who endorse the priority claim deal with objections pertaining to that claim.

¹⁸I formulate the deficiency claim in terms of ‘lower ranges’ rather than ‘the lowest range’. This is because some sufficientarians argue that justice is concerned with multiple thresholds on one continuum. They prioritize benefits in specific ranges depending on how low that range is compared to the other ranges. For multi-threshold sufficientarianism, see, e.g., Benbaji 2005, 2006; Huseby 2010, 2019, 2020.

¹⁹Though the deficiency claim is important for my characterization of sufficientarianism, it does little to distinguish sufficientarianism from its *plausible* rivals. We can imagine a view which posits non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits above the threshold. Such reversed sufficientarianism endorses the continuum claim and the priority claim and says that we must prioritize benefits above the threshold instead of below it. Such a view, which rejects the deficiency claim, must say that because someone is *not* deprived of some good, they should have priority. But I fail to see what type of reasons could justify this.

III. THREE OBJECTIONS TO THE REVISED CHARACTERIZATION OF SUFFICIENTARIANISM

I have argued that all and only sufficientarians endorse the continuum claim, the priority claim, and the deficiency claim. However, one might raise three objections to this characterization: namely that the traditional sufficientarian theses articulate a different distributive principle from those three claims, that the claims are not sufficient for a view to be distinctively sufficientarian, and, finally, that those claims are not necessary for a view to be a sufficientarian view.²⁰ Let me discuss them in turn.

My characterization of sufficientarianism aims to capture the same view as the traditional sufficientarian theses. One might object that it does not succeed in this respect, because the traditional sufficientarian theses may be taken to articulate a different distributive principle from the continuum, the priority, or the deficiency claims. However, the traditional sufficientarian theses implicitly endorse those three claims. First, the *positive thesis* states that it is morally valuable to have enough of some good(s).²¹ This entails all three claims. It entails the continuum claim because the good one can have ‘enough’ or ‘not enough’ of is the same above and below the threshold. And it entails the priority claim and the deficiency claim because benefits in the range below the threshold, which deal with deficiency, have priority over benefits in the range above it. Second, the *negative thesis* states that once people have enough, no further distributive criteria apply.²² This thesis assumes the continuum claim, because it requires that there are at least two ranges of the same good on one continuum, where in the range above the threshold no distributive criteria apply. Third, the *shift thesis* says that once people have enough, there is a shift in our reasons for benefiting them further.²³ This shift relies on the idea that there is a morally significant difference between the ranges above and below the threshold, which again assumes all three claims. Therefore, all sufficientarian views which draw on the traditional sufficientarian theses implicitly endorse the continuum claim, the priority claim, and the deficiency claim.

The second objection to my characterization of sufficientarianism, which is that it is not sufficient to define a distinctively sufficientarian view, can be raised in three different ways. First, some sufficientarians hold that sufficientarianism must include the negative thesis.²⁴ According to my characterization of sufficientarianism, however, the negative thesis is only distinctive for specific conceptions of sufficientarianism. The three claims are compatible with many ‘range principles’. A range principle could state, for example, that *within* a range above or below the threshold, the distribution should be egalitarian, prioritarian,

²⁰I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising these objections.

²¹See Casal 2007, pp. 298–9; Shields 2012, pp. 105–7.

²²See Casal 2007, pp. 299–303; Shields 2012, pp. 102–5.

²³See Shields 2012, pp. 108–11, 115–16.

²⁴E.g. Axelsen and Nielsen 2015, pp. 407–8; Nielsen 2017.

maximin, utilitarian, track justice in transactions, follow a relational conception of justice, and so forth. One possible range principle that sufficientarian views can endorse is that justice specifies no distributive criteria above the threshold. But this objection rightly points out that the three claims of sufficientarianism are compatible with any type of range principle and do not imply a commitment to the negative thesis.

Second, one might object that the proposed characterization qualifies *any* view which draws on a sufficiency threshold, such as a poverty threshold or social minimum, as a sufficientarian view. That significantly broadens the scope of sufficientarianism compared to how the view is commonly interpreted. It implies, for example, that pluralist luck egalitarians, such as Larry Temkin, are sufficientarians when they say that ‘the urgency of great suffering or need may play a greater role in explaining the priority we typically give to those suffering or in great need than appeals to prioritarianism or egalitarianism’.²⁵ However, this definition of sufficientarianism may be too broad, since pluralist luck egalitarianism is commonly regarded as a rival of sufficientarianism.

However, I do not think this objection shows that the characterization is flawed. If it includes views such as Temkin’s luck egalitarianism and other assumed rivals of sufficientarianism, this only means that the debate between sufficientarianism and such views is not about sufficiency thresholds, but about what the most plausible theory of justice is in other respects. If anything, then, the proposed characterization clarifies rather than obscures where the conflict between such views really lies. Moreover, because Temkin allows for distinctively sufficientarian concerns to play a role in his theory, objections about, say, the arbitrariness of sufficiency thresholds or the priority for benefits below such thresholds threaten his view as well. Hence, defending a sufficiency threshold that plays only a minor role in one’s theory of justice does not make one a non-sufficientarian. It simply makes one a sufficientarian who believes that the ideal of sufficiency should play a minor role in conceptualizing justice.

Third, it may seem that prioritarianism could be presented as a sufficientarian view, on the grounds that it could endorse the continuum claim and specifies a priority rule. However, prioritarianism does not claim that there are different ranges between which benefits should be weighted differently on non-instrumental grounds. Instead, it holds that the moral value of benefits for an individual is greater the lower an individual’s current level on the range and the greater the size of the benefit as measured by the relevant metric. Therefore, prioritarianism rejects the priority claim and does not count as a sufficientarian view.

The third objection to the proposed characterization of sufficientarianism is that the combination of the continuum claim, the priority claim, and the deficiency claim excludes some of the prominent sufficientarian views. If there are sufficientarian views which reject them, then these three claims cannot be

²⁵Temkin 2003a, p. 65.

necessary for a distinctively sufficientarian view. For instance, sufficientarians like Martha Nussbaum or David Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen may seem to reject the continuum claim, because they say that justice is concerned with different capabilities.²⁶ And Nussbaum seems to reject the priority claim, by defending different capabilities which are incommensurable and between which no priority rules can be specified.

However, the proposed characterization does not rule out such sufficientarian views. Consider as an example Nussbaum's view, which says that 'a decent political order must secure to all citizens at least a threshold level of ... ten Central Capabilities'.²⁷ These capabilities include, among others, life, bodily health, emotions, play, and control over one's environment. What I suggest here is that, *for each of those individual capabilities*, Nussbaum holds that there are two ranges on one continuum that are demarcated by a threshold. For instance, there is a range indicating 'enough play' and a range indicating 'not enough play' on a single continuum of levels of 'play'. And there is a range indicating 'having control over one's environment' and a range indicating that such control is lacking on a single continuum of levels of 'control over one's environment'. Rather than rejecting the continuum claim, then, Nussbaum's view entails a commitment to a variety of continua and claims that sufficiency is required in each of them.

Subsequently, one might argue that Nussbaum rejects the priority claim by saying that capabilities are incommensurable. She holds that if 'people are below the threshold on any one of the capabilities, that is a failure of basic justice, no matter how high up they are on all the others'.²⁸ However, incommensurability does not violate the priority claim. Consider the following example.²⁹ Suppose we compare Rich, Poor, and Superpoor with respect to incommensurable capabilities α and β . Suppose, furthermore, that justice requires sufficiency in α and β . Rich is safely above the sufficiency threshold for both α and β . However, Poor and Superpoor suffer from different deficiencies. Poor is lacking α , whereas Superpoor is lacking β . If so, benefits for Poor in α have priority over benefits for Rich in α . This is because Poor is below the sufficiency threshold, whereas Rich is not. For the same reason, benefits for Superpoor in β have priority over benefits for Rich in β .

However, because of the incommensurability of capabilities α and β , what Nussbaum's view does *not* specify is whether we should prioritize benefiting Poor in α *or* benefiting Superpoor in β . Since the view does not specify which of those capabilities has priority, it offers no guidance on how we must deal with such situations. But such guidance is not absent because the view rejects the priority claim—after all, it agrees that benefits in the range below the sufficiency threshold in α (or β) have priority over benefits in the range above that sufficiency threshold.

²⁶Nussbaum 2013; Axelsen and Nielsen 2015.

²⁷Nussbaum 2013, p. 33.

²⁸Nussbaum 2006, p. 167.

²⁹I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this example.

Rather, what incommensurability entails is that we cannot specify priority rules that guide conflicts between different continua. To deal with such conflicts, then, Nussbaum must endorse additional claims to the three sufficientarian claims; but she does not reject those claims.³⁰

In sum, sufficientarianism combines the continuum claim, the priority claim, and the deficiency claim. It says that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits in certain ranges over benefits in other ranges; that at least two of those ranges are on one continuum; and that the lower a range on a continuum, the more priority it has. These three claims are necessary and sufficient for any distinctively sufficientarian view.

IV. FIVE COMMON OBJECTIONS TO SUFFICIENTARIANISM

In the following sections, I reappraise five objections to sufficientarianism in light of the continuum claim, the priority claim, and the deficiency claim. These objections are that sufficientarianism is objectionably indifferent to certain inequalities (the ‘indifference objection’), neglects individual responsibility (the ‘responsibility objection’), fetishizes threshold-crossing benefits (the ‘absolutism objection’), relies on non-existent thresholds (the ‘no-threshold objection’), and that its thresholds are arbitrary (the ‘arbitrariness objection’).

These five objections have been addressed in the literature, some more extensively than others. Yet there is no unified discussion of these objections that draws on the conceptual anatomy of sufficientarianism. I will argue that by revisiting the objections in light of the three claims of sufficientarianism, we can reassess their merit, strengthen sufficientarianism, and give a more robust justification for sufficiency thresholds in social policy and institutional design. I will introduce the objections, and then discuss them in detail in subsequent sections.

A. THE INDIFFERENCE OBJECTION

The indifference objection holds that sufficientarianism is objectionably indifferent to inequalities above the threshold.³¹ As Paula Casal argues,

[S]uppose that [while providing] every patient with enough medicine, food, comfort, and so forth, a hospital receives a fantastic donation, which includes spare rooms for visitors, delicious meals, and the best in world cinema. If its administrators then arbitrarily decide to devote all those luxuries to just a few fortunate beneficiaries, their decision would be unfair.³²

³⁰Nussbaum (2000, pp. 1024–5) suggests that if capabilities conflict, a cost–benefit analysis might be necessary, even though it would not fully capture the incommensurability of those capabilities.

³¹E.g. Arneson 2000a, p. 347; 2002, pp. 181–4, 189; Temkin 2003a, pp. 65–6; 2003b, pp. 769–71; Casal 2007, pp. 307–8, 311–12, 315–16; Holtug 2007, pp. 149–50; 2010, pp. 231–5; Brighouse and Swift 2009, pp. 125–6.

³²Casal 2007, p. 307.

However, sufficientarianism seems committed to accepting such a decision as fair, since everyone already has enough. Consequently, sufficientarianism fails to capture morally significant inequalities once people have secured enough.

B. THE ABSOLUTISM OBJECTION

The absolutism objection holds that sufficientarianism allows the better-off to cross the threshold at the expense of the worse-off, even if the latter are well below the threshold (or at the expense of the slightly better-off, who are only just above the threshold).³³ Shlomi Segall puts the point as follows: sufficientarianism favours

aiding better-off Smith (because doing so would lift him above the sufficiency threshold) over aiding worse-off Jones, who, unfortunately for him, could only be lifted to just below the sufficiency threshold. This might be desirable for all sorts of reasons, but is nevertheless in conflict with our intuitions concerning distributive justice.³⁴

Hence, sufficientarianism favours threshold-crossing benefits over all other benefits—and such fetishism, critics argue, is objectionable.

C. THE RESPONSIBILITY OBJECTION

The responsibility objection holds that sufficientarianism is objectionably indifferent to inequalities that are caused by misfortune or something that a person cannot be held responsible for.³⁵ For instance, suppose both A and B are below the threshold, but only A is in this position due to something she can be held responsible for. According to Larry Temkin, who raises the responsibility objection, we could feel equal compassion towards A and B, but still hold that B is entitled to compensation, whereas A is not.³⁶ However, sufficientarianism must claim that both A and B are equally entitled to compensation, because both A and B are below the threshold. Therefore, sufficientarianism fails to take misfortune and responsibility into account, or so the objection goes.

D. THE NO-THRESHOLD OBJECTION

The no-threshold objection holds that the threshold which sufficientarianism posits does not exist.³⁷ For example, Casal asserts that ‘it is strange to think that

³³E.g. Arneson 2000b, pp. 56–7; 2002, pp. 188–9; 2006, pp. 26–33; Roemer 2004, pp. 278–9; Casal 2007, pp. 315–16; Holtug 2007, pp. 151–4; Wolff and De-Shalit 2007, pp. 91–3; Segall 2010, p. 40; Dorsey 2014, pp. 50, 53; Knight 2015, pp. 123–4.

³⁴Segall 2013, p. 137, n. 10.

³⁵E.g. Arneson 2000a, pp. 347–8; 2002, pp. 191–3; Temkin 2003b, pp. 769–72; Segall 2010, pp. 40–1; Knight 2015, pp. 122–3.

³⁶Temkin 2003b, p. 772.

³⁷E.g. Arneson 2000b, p. 56; 2002, p. 194; Casal 2007, p. 317; Holtug 2010, pp. 207, 227–31; Dorsey 2014, pp. 50, 53.

[having reached the threshold] individuals can suddenly plummet from having absolute priority to no priority whatsoever'.³⁸ And Richard Arneson claims: 'A small shift in the values of the factors that morally matter should not generate a large shift in what we morally ought to do.'³⁹ However, sufficientarianism says that small shifts may sometimes allow people to cross the threshold and bring about significant changes in what people are owed or what they owe others, morally speaking.

E. THE ARBITRARINESS OBJECTION

The arbitrariness objection holds that sufficientarianism proposes thresholds that are arbitrary and not established by good reasons.⁴⁰ To illustrate, Arthur Ripstein argues that resources needed for 'meaningful agency' must be distributed according to some sufficiency ideal.⁴¹ Arneson objects to that view: 'Meaningful agency (under any plausible construal) comes in degrees, and there is no unique level of agency that generates distributive-justice imperatives.'⁴² Generalizing from this, many metrics of justice, such as wellbeing or economic welfare, may each have a gradually diminishing marginal importance the more people have of it, but never undergo a sharp change in importance. Consequently, for all such metrics, no good reason exists for a threshold that posits a sharp change in what ought to be done.

It may seem that the no-threshold objection and the arbitrariness objection are two sides of the same coin.⁴³ Both objections target the idea of a 'threshold'. However, the no-threshold objection rejects the idea that there are thresholds that matter from the standpoint of justice. But the arbitrariness objection claims that, even if such thresholds exist, their exact level cannot be established. The responses to these objections that I will offer also differ. The no-threshold objection effectively targets the priority claim, whereas the arbitrariness objection targets the combination of the priority claim and the continuum claim. And discussing the no-threshold objection and the arbitrariness objection independently will prove the most beneficial for specifying the most plausible conception of sufficientarianism.

V. THE OBJECTIONS TO INDIFFERENCE, ABSOLUTISM, AND RESPONSIBILITY

The indifference objection, the absolutism objection, and the responsibility objection target specific conceptions of sufficientarianism. However, they do not

³⁸Casal 2007, p. 317.

³⁹Arneson 2006, p. 30.

⁴⁰E.g. Goodin 1987, p. 49; Arneson 2000b, p. 56; 2002, pp. 185, 189–91; 2006, pp. 26–32; 2010, pp. 32–3; Casal 2007, pp. 312–14; Wolff and De-Shalit 2007, p. 92; Hooker 2008, pp. 181–91; Dorsey 2014, p. 50.

⁴¹See Ripstein 1999, ch. 9.

⁴²Arneson 2002, p. 91.

⁴³I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

undermine any of the three claims of sufficientarianism. Therefore, they pose no threat to sufficientarianism as such. To support this idea, I will first discuss some traditional responses to these objections. I will then argue that sufficientarians can, and should, strengthen their case against the objections by drawing on the revised characterization of sufficientarianism instead of on the traditional sufficientarian theses.

The objections to indifference and absolutism threaten sufficientarianism under certain interpretations of the negative thesis. The negative thesis can be interpreted as a range principle and/or a priority rule.⁴⁴ As a range principle, the negative thesis states that justice specifies no further distributive criteria above the threshold, which triggers the indifference objection. As a priority rule, the negative thesis states that we must give lexical priority to sub-threshold benefits, but this priority is problematized by the absolutism objection. Subsequently, the objection to responsibility challenges conceptions of sufficientarianism that exclude a concern for responsibility when specifying what a just allocation of valuable goods consists in.

The traditional sufficientarian theses suggest two lines of argument against these objections. The first is that indifference, absolutism, and/or neglect of responsibility are attractive features of sufficientarianism. For example, Axelsen and Nielsen argue that indifference is plausible once people have secured enough to be ‘free from duress’.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Philipp Kanschik weakens the pull of the indifference objection by arguing that indifference is compatible with progressive taxation.⁴⁶ And Robert Huseby claims that absolutism is an attractive feature of sufficientarianism because it prevents benefits at the upper end of the distribution from outweighing benefits for the least well-off.⁴⁷ Moreover, Anders Herlitz argues that leaving responsibility and misfortune aside allows us to better analyse what justice requires regarding those who are badly off due to their own actions.⁴⁸ Therefore, according to Herlitz, we should neglect a concern for responsibility when considering social policies aimed at securing a social minimum.

The second response to these objections is to defend metrics, range principles, and priority rules that avoid indifference, absolutism, and/or neglect of responsibility. For example, Liam Shields proposes the shift thesis, which entails that justice does specify distributive criteria above the threshold and that benefits below the threshold need not have lexical priority.⁴⁹ Similarly, Yitzhak Benbaji rejects lexical priority and instead gives non-lexical priority to benefits depending on the range they are in.⁵⁰ And Christopher Freiman defends a libertarian view

⁴⁴See also Huseby 2020, sect. 2.

⁴⁵Axelsen and Nielsen 2015.

⁴⁶Kanschik 2015.

⁴⁷Huseby 2010, 2020.

⁴⁸Herlitz 2019, pp. 4–9.

⁴⁹Shields 2012, p. 108. However, the shift thesis *could* give lexical priority, because one possible specification of the shift thesis is the negative thesis. See Shields 2017, p. 211.

⁵⁰Benbaji 2005, 2006.

which endorses a commitment to sufficientarianism without committing itself to the negative thesis.⁵¹

To give another example, Kirsty MacFarlane raises the indifference objection to thresholds in educational justice because, she argues, informal segregation is likely to persist if inequalities above the threshold are allowed.⁵² In response, sufficientarians could propose different range principles above and below the threshold. For instance, perhaps below the threshold, we care about reducing inequality because of the non-positional value of education (for example, that it is ‘good’ to be educated), whereas above that threshold, we are concerned with educational equality on the basis of its positional value (for example, if some invest significantly more in the education of their offspring than others this potentially undermines equality of opportunity).

However, the traditional sufficientarian theses fail to appreciate another and arguably much stronger line of argument against the objections. The common objections to sufficientarianism are seldom objections to *sufficientarianism* in particular. Consider the absolutism objection that sufficientarianism should not give lexical priority to sub-threshold benefits. Sufficientarianism says that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits in certain ranges over benefits in other ranges. Yet, as we have seen, many non-threshold views, such as Rawlsian views, *also* endorse that priority claim. Rawls even defends *lexical* priority rules to resolve conflicts between basic liberties, equal opportunity, and fairness in the distribution of resources.

I will defend the importance of this similarity between sufficientarianism and other views which endorse the priority claim in Section VI. What matters here is that the traditional sufficientarian theses do not bring this similarity to the fore. Rawlsian views can reject all the traditional sufficientarian theses and still fall prey to the absolutism objection. In fact, Rawls has been criticized precisely because of his commitment to lexical priority.⁵³ Moreover, critics of Rawls have applied versions of the responsibility objection to his view as well. For example, Rawls’s insensitivity to responsibility has been criticized extensively by G. A. Cohen, Ronald Dworkin, and Richard Arneson.⁵⁴ We should therefore be hesitant to view the common objections to sufficientarianism as objections to sufficientarianism in particular. Rather, they are objections to specific range principles and priority rules that can and have been endorsed by both sufficientarians and non-sufficientarians. One crucial flaw in the traditional sufficientarian theses, then, is their failure to appreciate the many ways in which sufficientarianism is *not* distinct from its rivals. Many objections to sufficientarianism equally threaten its rivals precisely because of the similarities between those views.

⁵¹Freiman 2012.

⁵²Macfarlane 2018.

⁵³Most famously by H. L. A. Hart (1983).

⁵⁴See Dworkin 1981, 2000; Arneson 1989, 2008; G. A. Cohen 1989.

Hence, the indifference objection, the absolutism objection, and the responsibility objection are not objections to sufficientarianism as such, but to the metrics, range principles, and priority rules that certain sufficientarian views posit. But many non-sufficientarian views draw on similar metrics, range principles, and priority rules. This renders them equally vulnerable to such objections. In what follows, I will draw on this insight to respond to the no-threshold and the arbitrariness objections. In doing so, I will argue in favour of a *political* interpretation of sufficientarianism, as opposed to a *natural* interpretation of that view.

VI. PLUMMETING, SHIFTING, AND THE NO-THRESHOLD OBJECTION

The no-threshold objection problematizes sufficientarianism because of the ‘plummeting’⁵⁵ and ‘large shift in what we morally ought to do’⁵⁶ that sufficiency thresholds give rise to. The traditional response that sufficientarians have offered to this objection is that there are in fact thresholds which justify such shifting and plummeting. Examples of this are thresholds which denote the point above which people can be free from deprivation, live good lives, be autonomous, or flourish.⁵⁷ If such a sufficiency threshold can be determined, this answers both the no-threshold objection and the arbitrariness objection. Consequently, sufficientarians have gone to great lengths to defend such thresholds.

However, the characterization of sufficientarianism as combining the continuum claim, the priority claim, and the deficiency claim suggests a novel and more fundamental response to the no-threshold objection. This response starts with the argument that all views which endorse the priority claim give rise to shifting and plummeting, even if they reject thresholds and the traditional sufficientarian theses (see Section VI.A). Subsequently, it shows that sufficientarianism can learn from other views that endorse the priority claim that thresholds need not exist for them to play a role in conceptualizing justice (Section VI.B). This both recasts how sufficientarianism can be interpreted as a theory of distributive justice and strengthens the response to the arbitrariness objection, which I will turn to in Section VII.

A. THE NO-THRESHOLD OBJECTION TO NON-THRESHOLD VIEWS

Sufficientarianism gives priority to benefits below the threshold. But many non-threshold views, such as Rawlsian egalitarianism and certain pluralist views, also say that we must prioritize certain benefits over others. Such non-threshold views reject *thresholds* demarcating the point at which priority must be given, but nevertheless assume that shifts in priority can occur. And it is such shifts in priority rather than the threshold itself that ground the no-threshold objection.

⁵⁵Casal 2007, p. 317.

⁵⁶Arneson 2006, p. 30.

⁵⁷E.g. Benbaji 2005; Casal 2007; Huseby 2010; Axelsen and Nielsen 2015; Shields 2016; Claassen 2018.

Recall Rawls's theory of justice as fairness, which holds that equalizing basic liberties takes lexical priority over equal opportunity. Consider a society in which opportunities are distributed fairly, but basic liberties unfairly. And suppose that, given the lexical priority of the basic liberties, the state issues policies which promote them at the expense of equal opportunity. If this happens, any person whose basic liberties are secured suddenly plummets to having no priority at all, and in fact may experience a significant setback in terms of opportunities. Other people's basic liberties must be guaranteed (at least to the largest possible extent) before we should, from the standpoint of justice, be concerned with their opportunities.

Hence, the 'plummeting' and 'large shift in what we morally ought to do' result not from the threshold, but from the fact that certain benefits have priority over others. Put differently, plummeting and shifting do not occur because people have enough, but because they reach a point where benefiting them no longer has priority. 'Threshold fetishism' may be unique to sufficientarianism, but 'priority fetishism' is a more appropriate label, and many views fetishize priorities.

Someone might reply that giving priority as such is not a problem, but that the way sufficientarianism in particular gives priority is objectionable. Prioritizing between ranges on different continua (Rawlsian views, for example) may be less objectionable than prioritizing between ranges on one continuum, as sufficientarianism does. Yet why should this be the case? It is easier to compare benefits in the same metric. We can see how having the economic resources to be free from deprivation and having the economic resources to be very affluent are both similar and distinct. They are similar because we are comparing economic resources. But they are distinct in that, according to many, being free from deprivation is morally more urgent than being very affluent. Now compare, say, 'basic liberties' and 'equal opportunities'. It is easy to see how these are distinct. But which is more important? Which level of 'basic liberties' weighs more than, less than, or equals a certain level of 'equal opportunities'? I am not suggesting that no answer is available here. But any answer to this question can ground a response to the no-threshold objection for both Rawlsian views and sufficientarian views. If, as Rawlsian views claim, one metric can take priority over another, then benefits below a threshold can also take priority over benefits above it.

A different and more radical reply to my argument is to reject *all* views which endorse the priority claim. This would exclude sufficientarianism, Rawlsian views, and other theories of justice that endorse that claim. This is a possible reply because there are views in distributive justice which escape the no-threshold objection. Recall, for instance, that prioritarianism specifies what justice requires without giving priority to certain benefits on the grounds that they are in the range above or below the threshold. Such a view does not posit a threshold, and rejects the priority claim. And the same is true for strict egalitarianism, which, as I have argued, also rejects the priority claim.

However, those and other non-threshold views only reject the priority claim if they maintain one of two things. First, that justice is solely concerned with a single, monist metric. Or, second, that justice is concerned with different, incommensurable metrics and that sufficiency is not required in any of those metrics. Let us call such non-threshold views which reject the priority claim *non-priority views*. By unpacking what such views amount to, I will argue that only a few theories of distributive justice are non-priority views. Moreover, I will argue that those few theories are not particularly attractive.

Non-priority views say that justice is either solely concerned with a single, monist metric or that it is concerned with multiple but incommensurable monist metrics. By ‘single metric’ I mean that, contrary to Rawlsian views or pluralist views, only one metric is taken into consideration. By ‘incommensurable metric’ I mean that between metrics that may be taken into consideration no priority rules can be specified. Non-priority views are committed to this, because if justice is concerned with two or more commensurable metrics, then it should specify priority rules for making trade-offs between those metrics. This effectively entails the priority claim.

Moreover, a commitment to a single metric presupposes that all social goods are reducible to individual goods. Some reject this, because it entails that goods such as culture, friendship, and love are either valuable because they are reducible to individual goods or they are irrelevant from the standpoint of justice.⁵⁸ But if a view accepts irreducible social goods, it must specify priority rules that govern cases where, say, having more of an irreducible social good undermines individual welfare (unless those goods are incommensurable). But that commits one to the priority claim, and, consequently, renders one’s view vulnerable to the no-threshold objection.

Thus, by committing to a ‘monist metric’, non-priority views must claim that their metric(s) consists of only one component. Yet many philosophers assert that justice is concerned with a metric that has several components, such as basic needs, wants, freedoms, social goods, a package of outcomes and opportunities, and so forth.⁵⁹ Proponents of such ‘pluralist metrics’ must specify how clashes between different components must be resolved, and, consequently, must specify priority rules. Hence, only non-threshold views which adopt a single monist metric or multiple incommensurable monist metrics can avoid the priority claim. Only those views are non-priority views.

I take it that few theories of distributive justice are such non-priority views. Perhaps utilitarianism and other theories that focus on wellbeing as the ultimate metric hold such a view if wellbeing is conceptualized as having one component, provided that they reject sufficiency thresholds and that concerns for wellbeing should not be weighed against other moral concerns. Another example of this is

⁵⁸On irreducible social goods, see Taylor 1995; MacIntyre 1998; Murphy 2005.

⁵⁹See Moss 2014, pp. 79–84.

a view which takes ‘welfare’ as the metric of justice, identifies welfare with the satisfaction of an individual’s actual desires, holds that social welfare consists solely of aggregative individual welfare, and does not specify a sufficiency threshold that everyone should reach.

Admittedly, proponents of such non-priority views can raise the no-threshold objection to views which endorse the priority claim, including sufficientarianism. Yet many others, including Rawlsian views and pluralist views which prioritize between different values, must answer the no-threshold objection. I will now turn to one specific answer that Rawlsians in particular have given to the objection, and will recast sufficientarianism along similar lines.

B. SUFFICIENTARIANISM: NATURAL OR POLITICAL?

Rawlsian views hold that basic liberties take priority over equal opportunity. But Rawlsians do not regard this priority as a law of nature. Instead, they consider that the most plausible conception of justice gives priority to basic liberties over equal opportunity. Sufficientarians can model their view along similar lines. They can maintain that the most plausible conception of justice draws on a sufficiency threshold. This not only serves as a response to the no-threshold objection, but it also shows how sufficientarians can respond to the other common objections to their view.

Frankfurt’s account of sufficientarianism can help illustrate the distinction between the different types of sufficientarianism that I am after here. Recall that Frankfurt says that someone has enough when that person ‘is content, or that it is reasonable for him to be content, with having no more money than he has’.⁶⁰ We can distil two types of sufficientarianism from this.⁶¹ The first type of sufficientarianism says that someone has enough when that person is content with having no more money than they have. I will refer to this as *natural sufficientarianism*. It posits an actual threshold—the amount of money with which someone is content—that is out there, as it were, and that can be discovered. The second type of sufficientarianism says that someone has enough when it is reasonable for that person to be content with having no more money than they have. I will refer to this as *political sufficientarianism*. Such sufficientarianism first and foremost says that it is reasonable for people to agree that they should be content with having a certain amount of money. Here the threshold is grounded upon a conception of what people owe to each other rather than on some facts about the world or human nature.

This distinction between natural sufficientarianism and political sufficientarianism is crucial. I will argue that political sufficientarianism is immune to the sceptic’s charge of non-existing thresholds, whereas natural

⁶⁰Frankfurt 1987, p. 37.

⁶¹This distinction draws on Joshua Cohen’s distinction between ‘natural threshold interpretations’ and ‘social equilibrium interpretations’ of the social minimum; J. Cohen 1989, pp. 733–4.

sufficientarianism is not. Moreover, political sufficientarianism enables sufficientarians to respond to objections to indifference, absolutism, responsibility, and arbitrariness with much more force than natural sufficientarianism.

Whether it is defended or criticized, sufficientarianism is often assumed to endorse 'natural' thresholds. One such example is a threshold set by measuring subjectively experienced wellbeing or some welfare level with which people are content.⁶² Another example of such a natural threshold is a calorie-intake threshold in poverty analysis.⁶³ But this raises the question of whether there are any such thresholds, and, if so, why those thresholds matter from the standpoint of justice. Hence, the no-threshold objection certainly targets natural sufficientarianism. Natural thresholds may not exist, and even if they do, they may be irrelevant from the standpoint of justice or they may not be the same for all people and circumstances. In short, natural thresholds may not justify the plummeting and shifting that the no-threshold objection rejects.

In contrast, political sufficientarianism says that it is unreasonable to deny that certain thresholds matter from the standpoint of justice. For instance, it may be unreasonable to deny that people should be able to meet their basic needs or to achieve some higher level of wellbeing. Importantly, however, denying this claim is not unreasonable because there is a definite level of 'being able to meet one's basic needs' that is universal for all people and circumstances. It is unreasonable, because the most plausible conception of justice specifies what we owe to each other by drawing on such a concern for basic needs. Put differently, political sufficientarianism is a plausible principle of distributive justice if there is no better way to specify the demands of justice than by drawing on sufficiency thresholds. Political sufficientarianism does not rely on the existence of thresholds, but on the idea that in specifying the demands of justice sufficiency, thresholds must play some minor or larger role. They do so not because those thresholds exist in the natural understanding of that term, but because such thresholds help formulate the most plausible conception of what justice requires. Because of the political nature of such thresholds, whatever objections are levelled against them depend on there being a more plausible alternative to specify the demands of justice.

Crucially, the political understanding of sufficientarianism not only offers a response to the no-threshold objection, but also suggests that the objections to absolutism, responsibility, indifference, and arbitrariness must be viewed in a different light. On the assumption that the most plausible conceptions of justice draw on sufficiency thresholds, the worries raised by those objections are all secondary, in the sense that they are inevitable. Whether thresholds must specify lexical or non-lexical priority rules, include a concern for responsibility, or be

⁶²To give another example, Brian Barry (1975, p. 97) assumes such a natural threshold when he says that, according to Rawls, 'there is a definitive threshold (and the same one for everybody) up to which increments of wealth and power are valued [by the individual] but above which they have little or no value'. See also Rawls 1999, p. 134.

⁶³See Naiken 2003.

indifferent above the threshold, for example depends on what the most plausible specification of such thresholds requires. But this implies that such objections are not objections to sufficientarianism in general but objections to *specific* sufficientarian views.

Hence, political sufficientarianism says that the most plausible conception of justice requires that some particular sufficiency threshold is met. Put differently, it says that we cannot specify what we owe to each other without drawing on sufficiency thresholds.

VII. IN RESPONSE TO THE ARBITRARINESS OBJECTION

According to the arbitrariness objection, it is impossible to provide good reasons for any specific sufficiency threshold. A critic can ask why any given threshold should not be higher or lower. Despite several attempts by sufficientarians to respond, this remains among the most prominent objections to sufficientarianism.⁶⁴ I will recast some of those responses by drawing on the proposed characterization of sufficientarianism. Furthermore, in light of the distinction between natural and political sufficientarianism, I will argue that what matters is not whether a threshold is arbitrary, but whether that threshold, even if arbitrary, is an essential element of the most plausible conception of distributive justice.

The first response to the arbitrariness objection is that many views endorse sufficiency thresholds and thus implicitly assume a response to that objection. This does not, of course, justify any kind of threshold, since views might endorse certain thresholds, but reject others. However, it does suggest that the problem of arbitrariness is not an insurmountable problem for sufficientarianism.

The second response is that the arbitrariness objection falls prey to the *continuum fallacy*.⁶⁵ It assumes that, because there is a grey area between clear cases of ‘not having enough’ and clear cases of ‘having enough’, any sufficiency threshold on such a continuum is inherently arbitrary. However, one cannot conclude that there is no good reason to distinguish between not having enough and having enough from the premise that there is no particular point at which the former turns into the latter. Similarly, one cannot conclude that day and night are the same from the premise that there is no particular point at which ‘day’ becomes ‘night’. Hence, the arbitrariness problem is not a fundamental problem for sufficiency thresholds.

The third response is that sometimes there are good reasons to pick a specific level for the threshold. Let me give two examples. First, proponents of natural sufficientarianism might draw on social policy research to set a threshold. Such thresholds may track what it means to be ‘free from deprivation’⁶⁶ or what it

⁶⁴For discussion, see, e.g., Huseby 2010, pp. 180–2; Axelsen and Nielsen 2017, pp. 102–6; Shields 2017, pp. 218–20.

⁶⁵See also Reader 2006, pp. 348–9; Nielsen 2019a, pp. 23–4. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this response to the arbitrariness objection.

⁶⁶See, e.g., Gough 2019.

takes to be able to participate in a democratic society.⁶⁷ If so, the threshold is not arbitrary. Second, the arbitrariness objection assumes an arithmetical background where it is always possible to have more of the relevant metric.⁶⁸ However, the very idea of a threshold puts pressure on this assumption because it indicates a shortfall from something satiable.⁶⁹ According to some sufficientarians, the *principles* underlying the threshold are satiable.⁷⁰ Others claim that the *values* or *metrics* of the threshold are satiable.⁷¹ This notion of satiability grounds a response to the arbitrariness objection. To illustrate, consider a sufficientarian view which says that people should be free from deprivation. This requirement is satiable, because it can be met completely. As far as being free from deprivation is concerned, it does not make a relevant difference to say that someone is free from deprivation, that they are very much free from deprivation, or that they are extremely free from deprivation. And it makes no relevant difference to say that the principle that prescribes that people must be free from deprivation is sated, that it is completely sated, or even that it is extremely sated. Yet the arbitrariness objection assumes that differences in the range above the threshold are as relevant from the standpoint of justice as differences in the range below it. But when we ask what those levels *mean*, it may turn out that levels above the threshold are not relevantly distinct, and that, therefore, the threshold itself is not arbitrary.

The fourth and final response starts from the idea of political sufficientarianism. We may have good reasons to endorse a threshold, even if we must grant that, in the end, that threshold is arbitrary.⁷² Political sufficientarianism might simply accept that many thresholds are indeed arbitrary, but it need not, on that ground, accept that they are *objectionably* arbitrary. For example, one way to offer good reasons for an arbitrary threshold is via fair democratic procedures.⁷³ It is in the nature of political action that justice must be operationalized. Of course, one could then still ask why the threshold is set at T and not $T-1$, but if the answer is that this is decided upon via fair procedures, this provisionally settles the matter, and implementing the threshold is legitimate, provided there are options to challenge such thresholds.

Moreover, in response to concerns about arbitrariness, sufficientarians can opt for several types of thresholds. For example, vague thresholds may avoid worries about objectionable arbitrariness. If it is unclear whether someone has enough, sufficientarians can argue that one should act as if they are below the threshold, or propose a default rule that shifts the burden of proof to those who believe someone should be regarded as being above the threshold.⁷⁴ Of course, critics

⁶⁷See Anderson 2007; Satz 2007.

⁶⁸See Nielsen 2019b, pp. 809–14. On satiable principles, see Raz 1986, pp. 235–6.

⁶⁹I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this distinction.

⁷⁰E.g. Frankfurt 1987; Crisp 2003; Shields 2012.

⁷¹E.g. Axelsen and Nielsen 2015; Nielsen 2019b.

⁷²See also Page 2007, pp. 16–17.

⁷³E.g. Reader 2006, pp. 348–9; Robeyns 2017, pp. 24–5; Claassen 2018, pp. 114–17.

⁷⁴On precautionary reasoning, see Beyleveld and Pattinson 2000.

could ask where the exact boundaries of this vague threshold are. But when it comes to public policy and designing social institutions, a limited degree of arbitrariness should be tolerated and can be managed. In short, political sufficientarianism is not vulnerable to objectionable arbitrariness if there are good reasons to endorse seemingly arbitrary thresholds.

For political sufficientarianism, then, the issue of arbitrary thresholds is not about finding the right answer to the question of where exactly the threshold should be set. Political sufficientarians do not think of thresholds in the same way as physicists think about constants that appear in the laws of physics. The aim is not to propose a view about justice that tracks natural thresholds, but to offer a view which is the most plausible conception of justice. And political sufficientarianism claims that this conception of justice is one in which a sufficiency threshold must be met.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have proposed and defended the claim that sufficientarianism should be characterized as combining the three claims of sufficientarianism: a continuum claim, a priority claim, and a deficiency claim. Sufficientarianism says that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits in certain ranges over benefits in other ranges; that at least two of those ranges are on one continuum; and that the lower a range on a continuum, the more priority it has. Moreover, I have argued that the traditional sufficientarian theses do not fully appreciate both the distinctiveness of sufficientarianism and the similarities between sufficientarianism and its rivals. As a result, they leave sufficientarianism and sufficiency thresholds unnecessarily vulnerable to sustained critiques.

The proposed characterization strengthens the prospects for sufficientarianism and reinforces the justifiability of sufficientarian policies and institutions. The real conflict between sufficientarianism and its rivals does not lie in the fact that the former endorses thresholds and the latter do not. Rather, at stake are the different priority rules, range principles, and metrics that are defended by different theories of distributive justice. If sufficientarianism is contested, it should be contested for the right reasons. But if, as I have argued, sufficientarianism essentially combines a continuum claim, a priority claim, and a deficiency claim, those reasons are not offered by the common objections to sufficientarianism.

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