

UTILITY, PRIORITIES, AND QUIESCENT SUFFICIENCY

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I firstly discuss why a prioritarian clause can rescue the utilitarian doctrine from the risk of exacerbating inequality in the distribution of resources in those cases in which utility of income does not decline at the margin. Nonetheless, when in the presence of adaptive preferences, classic prioritarianism is more likely than utilitarianism to increase the inequality of resources under all circumstances, independently of the diminishing trend of utility. Hence, I propose to shift the informational focus of prioritarianism from welfare to either social income or capabilities in order to safeguard those who are worse off. Following this, I argue that we may have reasons to limit the aggregative logic of priority-amended utilitarianism through one or more sufficiency thresholds, and that we can partially defuse the negative-thesis objection that is usually levelled against sufficientarianism, provided we interpret the threshold(s) as valid only as long as everyone is led above it.

KEYWORDS

Capabilities, income, marginal utility, prioritarianism, quiescent sufficientarianism, threshold, welfare.

1. INTRODUCTION

Both prioritarianism and sufficientarianism have usually been presented and discussed in relation to egalitarianism and as valuable alternatives to it, since they are two theories of distributive justice that are not influenced by relativities between individuals but only by absolute levels of wellbeing. Roughly speaking, prioritarianism is the view that justice commands recognizing the priority of the worse off in the redistribution of benefits, by assigning a decreasing value to the benefits accruing to any potential recipient as we move from those individuals who experience low levels of welfare up to those who enjoy the highest levels¹. Meanwhile, the proponents of the sufficiency principle hold that duties of distributive justice are fulfilled when every individual is provided with the means for meeting a sufficiency threshold—or

¹ This is the welfarist version of prioritarianism that I shall criticize later on.

in other words, when everyone is given enough. Obviously, what kinds of things people should have in order to stay above the sufficiency threshold and how we should evaluate individual positions are open to debate and marked by consistent differences among sufficientarian philosophers.

In this article I discuss the prioritarian and sufficientarian doctrines not in relation to egalitarianism, but rather as improved variations of utilitarianism. I move from the consideration that prioritarianism represents an advance on utilitarianism because, by renouncing what Amartya Sen has defined as the “hidden” egalitarianism in utilitarian philosophy², and which consists in the tenet of equality of individual utility functions, prioritarianism is able to avoid the inegalitarian drifts that occur within utilitarianism when utility does not decline at the margin as expected. Indeed, in the latter case the utility principle tends to favour the better off³ for the simple reason that they manage to get more utility than the worse off from an equal basket of resources – differently from those other cases in which utility decreases at the margin and thus the utility principle leads toward an egalitarian distribution of resources. Moreover, I shall also argue that if we shift from a welfarist interpretation of prioritarianism—which is dominant in the literature—to alternative versions of prioritarianism that weigh utility on either income or capabilities, we could solve the utilitarian problem of the mental distortions stemming from the psychological phenomenon of adaptive preferences.

Meanwhile, sufficientarianism represents an amended form of priority-amended utilitarianism, because it allows us to grant priority to those who are worst off while preventing the trade-offs between the bottom and the top of society, which is allowed in prioritarianism. So, in the final analysis, the theoretical evolution from utilitarianism to prioritarianism first, and from prioritarianism to sufficientarianism next, does leave us with a normative account of justice that provides us with the philosophical tools for preserving the interests of the poorest and partially maintains – up to the sufficiency threshold – the aggregative spirit that is at the heart of the utilitarian doctrine, but obliges us to remain silent – from the point of view of justice – about inequalities occurring among those individuals who live above sufficiency. The latter would imply, as rightly highlighted by Paula Casal, that from a classical sufficientarian perspective, we ‘cannot support the preference for progressive over regressive taxes’, not simply among the super-rich but also among the super-rich and those who barely have enough for living a decent life⁴.

In other words, sufficientarianism can safeguard people who are in dire need in a much more effective way than both utilitarianism and prioritarianism can do, but this comes at the price of renouncing axiological incisiveness over the group of the better off. This occurs because, differently from other theories of justice advocating

² Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 13.

³ In terms of available resources.

⁴ Paula Casal, ‘Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough’, *Ethics* 117, no. 2. (2007): 311.

the guarantee of a basic minimum—such as the capability approach, for example—sufficientarianism is a comprehensive account of distributive justice. It does not simply set a minimum threshold as a basic requirement for a wider conception of distributive justice⁵, rather it maintains that the whole discourse about distributive justice is exclusively about leading people above the basic threshold. The consequence is that sufficientarianism cannot be coupled with other approaches to justice.

Therefore, sufficientarianism can be said to consist of both a positive and a negative thesis. The positive thesis holds that justice requires everyone to have enough of something and was initially formulated by Harry Frankfurt in antithesis to the egalitarian view, according to which justice consists primarily in equalising the welfare of all the individuals involved in the distributive scheme. Whereas, the negative thesis maintains that every individual having enough is the only distributive requirement, hence the whole discourse on justice runs out at the sufficiency threshold⁶.

In this article, I shall argue that if we interpret sufficientarianism in an alternative way, more precisely as consisting of temporary thresholds of sufficiency, we could retain the positive thesis of sufficientarianism, while limiting the drawbacks of the negative thesis. Accordingly, any given threshold (or series of thresholds⁷) holds its normative relevance as long as at least one person is still below it (or them). But once the sufficientarian mission has been accomplished, and everyone has finally crossed the threshold(s), we can maintain that sufficientarianism has lost its *raison d'être* with respect to that threshold(s), hence we can move on to a different account of distributive justice for regulating the interactions between those people who have been given 'enough', be it egalitarianism, utilitarianism, prioritarianism, libertarianism, and so on.

Read in this way, sufficientarianism would be an emergency account of justice, which will be held in abeyance until any of these two circumstances occur: either even one individual gets below the threshold(s) again, hence the old threshold(s) gets reactivated, or the emergence of new needs (or the disappearance of old ones) lead us to adopt a new threshold(s) of sufficiency. In this latter case, two other things may occur: either we conclude that every individual involved in our distributive scheme stands above the new threshold(s), and in this case the new threshold(s) replaces the old one in the quiescent mode, or we observe that some individuals are below the new threshold(s), thus the new threshold(s) becomes immediately

⁵ Martha Nussbaum is clear when she argues that with the capability approach she is not aiming to reject Rawls's contractualism, but rather to 'extend[...] [his] principles to cases that he believed a theory like his own could not reach'. See Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 25.

⁶ Both the positive and the negative theses were initially formulated in Harry Frankfurt, 'Equality as a Moral Ideal', *Ethics* 98, no. 1 (1987): 21-24. But they were named in this way for the first time in Casal, 'Why Sufficiency', 297-303.

⁷ As we shall see in the next sections, sufficiency can also consist of multiple thresholds, that can either be in a vertical or horizontal relation.

operative, blocking the other principles of justice that were adopted after the previous sufficiency threshold(s) got into quiescent mode.

In the next paragraphs, I will firstly explain the reasons that make prioritarianism preferable to utilitarianism and that make sufficientarianism preferable to prioritarianism. Later, I shall put forward the idea of quiescent sufficientarianism based on temporary thresholds by also tackling some objections that may be levelled against its underlying mechanism and its own definition. In the course of the article, I will alternate some considerations on the principles of justice – utility, priority and sufficiency – and on their possible axiological modifications – different weighting factors, higher/lower/single/multiple thresholds – with other remarks on the currency and the informational focus of justice, namely the ‘things’ that should be redistributed according to the principle of justice we are considering from time to time and the ‘things’ that we can/should take into consideration for assessing the individual position in society – realised utility, income, capabilities.

The final argument is that quiescent sufficiency has the advantage over utilitarianism and prioritarianism – in all its variants considered here – to be more radical in safeguarding the interests of the worst off, and has the advantage over classic sufficientarianism of allowing to tackle those inequalities that might emerge above the threshold, hence preventing the accumulation of excessive wealth at the top of society in comparison to the medium strata.

Quiescent sufficientarianism should be properly interpreted as a reformative political project aimed at securing a decent living condition for the millions of people who are experiencing dire poverty all around the world by temporarily shifting any concern of justice from the top to the bottom of society. In other words, sufficientarianism should not be considered as a classic principle of justice, which is valid in every circumstance, rather as normative requirement that precedes routinary distributive justice and whose purpose is to institutionalise a decent life for all.

2. FROM UTILITY TO PRIORITY

Classical utilitarianism is the ethical theory according to which an action is judged to be right if it produces the ‘greatest amount of happiness on the whole [...] taking into account all whose happiness is affected by the conduct’⁸. In the utilitarian doctrine, every ethical subject is endowed with a utility function, and every function matters in the same way. In other words, an increase n in utility on the utility function of agent A has the same value as an equal increase n on the utility function of agent B. Meanwhile, an increase $n+$ on the utility function of agent C is more valuable than an increase n occurring to either A or B. Every action occurring in the

⁸ Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1962), 411.

world has some consequences on some ethical subjects. An action is said to be better if it leads to higher increases in utility for the utility functions of all the subjects it affects. The moral mission of every individual consists in maximizing the overall utility.

As we can see from this brief description, there are four fundamental elements in the utilitarian theory: welfarism⁹, an imperative to maximize overall utility, consequentialism, and a hidden form of egalitarianism. The last element is the one that interests us most in this article and it could be made explicit in this way: pleasure weighs the same independently of who feels it. Utilitarians seek the maximization of overall utilities, regardless of how equally they are distributed, and they are ready to sacrifice a perfectly equal sum of utilities for a bigger, but much more unequal, sum. However, the ‘objective function’ they want to maximize is egalitarian, for utilitarians ascribe the same value to every utility function¹⁰. The egalitarianism of utility functions is the distinctive trait of utilitarianism that, paradoxically, leads the theory toward outcomes that are inegalitarian from the point of view of the distribution of resources. In other words, it is the characteristic that causes utilitarianism to foster the interests of the better off to the detriment of the worse off.

Imagine, for example, that we have to decide whether to allocate an extra benefit of €2.000 either to Marco, who is relatively poor, or to Giulio, who is relatively well off. Assume also that Marco has freely decided to live his life as a bohemian and the satisfaction of his basic desires does not mainly depend on money. He likes to frequent bars every night, to buy cheap drinks, to write experimental novels, and, in general, what he craves the most is to be recognized as an intellectual. While Giulio lives only to buy clothes and accessories for his cars. His happiness lies in collecting goods that he can show off when going out with his friends. Both in terms of welfare and resources Giulio is better off than Marco. Nonetheless, imagine that Giulio would gain more utility from an extra benefit of €2.000 than Marco. We might say that if we allocate €2.000 to Giulio we would yield 20 marginal units of utility (UG 20) while if we give the same money to Marco we would only yield 17 marginal units (UM 17). This can occur for several reasons. The main reason is that an equal marginal increase of money has a stronger effect on Giulio’s dominant life-goal—showing off luxury commodities—than on Marco’s one—being appreciated in his intellectual and alternative circle¹¹.

⁹ Utilitarians disagree on what constitutes welfare. Some of them argue that welfare is the product of mental states (the most common example being hedonism), some others look at the satisfaction of preferences (either first-order or second-order preferences) or at ‘objective’ elements that are taken to be valuable for everyone. See also Tim Mulgan, *Understanding Utilitarianism* (Stocksfield Hall, UK: Acumen, 2007), 61–92.

¹⁰ Sen, *Inequality*, 12–14.

¹¹ Consider also the importance of the ‘utility thresholds’, discussed in Frankfurt, ‘Equality’, 27–30.

In these circumstances, utilitarians would opt for the outcome that reinforces the inequality of welfare and of resources. They would allocate the money to Giulio because, through this, he would realise a higher marginal increase of utility than Marco; hence, this move would be preferable in terms of aggregate utility. This is a result that can be hardly accepted by those who believe in the moral principle that—setting aside any issue of deserts and responsibilities—we cannot let those who have more, both in terms of welfare and resources, take precedence over those who have less. Moreover, although the utilitarian doctrine does not look at equality in the distribution but only at the total sum of utilities, this is not because utilitarians are indifferent to the conditions of the worse off. Rather, they believe that if overall utility has been maximized, this has occurred because resources have been allocated where their utility declines less at the margin—in other words, they have been allocated to the worse off¹². Therefore, I believe that the idea of allocating the extra benefit to Giulio rather than to Marco should in some way also trouble those thinkers who have appealed to the utilitarian principle for advocating radical schemes of redistribution (including global redistribution) from the better off to the worse off¹³.

One way for utilitarians to get out of this theoretical trap is to renounce the egalitarianism of utility functions and to accept the prioritarian principle, according to which the value of a benefit is not an absolute value, rather it gets lower the better off the recipient is¹⁴. Therefore, in our case, prioritarians would not deny that €2.000 would bring more utility to Giulio than to Marco, and in relation to this extra benefit, they would accept that $UG=20$ while $UM=17$. But prioritarians would go further and say that we should not be satisfied with these results, rather we should weigh them based on the welfare level of the recipients¹⁵. So, they would take into account that Giulio is better off than Marco in terms of welfare, hence they would assign different weighting factors to the two potential recipients—say, 5 to Giulio and 7 to

¹² But my point in this article is that this utilitarian assumption does not hold true in every circumstance.

¹³ See, for example, Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: How To Play Your Part in Ending World Poverty* (London: Picador, 2010).

¹⁴ See the first famous formulation of the prioritarian view given by Derek Parfit in his Lindley Lecture, 'Equality or Priority' of 1991: 'benefiting people matters more the worse off these people are'¹⁴. Derek Parfit, 'Equality and Priority', *Ratio* 10, no. 3 (1997): 213. However, it is important to clarify that from the fact that utilitarians could renounce the egalitarianism of utility function we cannot infer that they might have normative reasons for doing it. Accordingly, my aim here is simply to discuss how utilitarians could safeguard the interests of the worst off without giving up on moral aggregation and welfarism. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to clarify this point.

On the difference between the prioritarian and the utilitarian function, see also Nils Holtug, 'Theories of Value Aggregation: Utilitarianism, Egalitarianism, Prioritarianism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Value Theory*, eds. Iwao Hirose and Jonas Olson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 277; and Iwao Hirose, *Egalitarianism* (London: Routledge, 2014), 91–92.

¹⁵ For now, I accept the assumption made by the majority of prioritarian thinkers that we should look at the welfare level of individuals. Later on, I challenge this assumption and argue that we should focus instead on resources or capabilities.

Marco. In the sense that the value of any benefit accruing to the two can only be obtained by weighting the utility that the benefit yields on their utility curve—which obviously varies according to the benefit—on their personal weighting factors—that remain stable as long as their welfare level does not change.

Therefore, prioritarrians would conclude that the value of €2.000 accruing to Marco is higher than if it were accruing to Giulio: $VG(\text{of } €2.000) = UG(20) * 5 = 100$; $VM(\text{of } €2.000) = UM(17) * 7 = 119$. Given that also prioritarianism is an aggregative theory¹⁶, it would recommend allocating the extra benefit where it tends to maximize overall value—that is to say, to Marco rather than to Giulio. So, by extending the discourse at the policy level, we can notice how the priority principle can guide the decision-maker towards the implementation of public policies that are more egalitarian than the ones commanded by the utilitarian principle.

The upshot is that prioritarianism can be considered as a form of amended utilitarianism, because when the utility of income does not decline at the margin as expected - hence an additional good produces a higher marginal utility if given to a person who has more goods rather than to the one who has less - the utilitarian doctrine tends to favour the wealthier potential recipient of benefits over the poorer one, while prioritarianism tends to do the opposite. Therefore, if utilitarians incorporate the prioritarian weighting factors in their calculations, they could preserve welfarism and aggregation while correcting for the inequalitarian drifts that emerge in a case as the one we have just examined. Conversely, in those other cases in which utility decreases at the margin, this further guarantee would not overturn the utilitarian results but only reinforce them¹⁷.

However, some cases do exist in which the prioritarian variant that is dominant in the literature, according to which the individual weighting factor should be in inverse proportion to welfare levels (welfare-prioritarianism¹⁸), might fall short of its commitment to giving priority to the worse off, up to the point of exacerbating the limits that utilitarianism has with interpersonal comparisons. I am referring to those

¹⁶ See Nils Holtug, 'Prioritarianism', in *Egalitarianism: New Essays on the Nature and Value of Equality*, eds. Nils Holtug and Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 134.

¹⁷ In other words, in the more common situations in which the utility of money does really diminish at the margin, prioritarian weighting factors would reinforce the egalitarian tendency of utilitarianism. Imagine this were the case in our previous example. So, assume that Marco would obtain more utility than Giulio from an extra benefit of €2.000. We might say that in relation to this benefit, $UM=20$ and $UG=17$ (the opposite of what I have postulated in the text). In this case, the prioritarian clause would not alter the utilitarian normative claim that we should allocate the benefit to Marco ($UM > UG$) but would only strengthen it, because $VM=20 * 7=140$ while $UG=17 * 5=85$. So, $VM - VG > UM - UG$. Hence, from a prioritarian view, it is even more important to benefit Marco than from the utilitarian perspective.

¹⁸ See, for example, Holtug, 'Prioritarianism', 132; Hirose, *Egalitarianism*, 89-99; and Richard Arneson, 'Egalitarianism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2013 Edition), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/egalitarianism/>>.

situations in which individuals have developed adaptive preferences – that is to say, when they have experienced a state of continuous deprivation up to the point of having become accustomed to it and having substantially lowered their expectations¹⁹. When this phenomenon occurs, such that among two potential recipients of a benefit the wealthier is less happy and the poorer is more happy, prioritarianism performs badly towards the poorer individual in all circumstances, while utilitarianism might still prefer the poorer person over the wealthier one on the condition that, in relation to the benefit we are discussing, utility does not decline at the margin.

Consider the case of a girl who is born in a poor and patriarchal society where women are denied education and basic liberties. This girl—let’s call her Francesca—has spent the first part of her life in her parents’ house simply waiting to be married off, which is considered to be the culmination of her adulthood. Now, also imagine that this girl, having been raised in a society where women do not entertain any higher expectations than becoming ‘wives’, is quite happy with her condition. She feels like she is following her only path in life, she believes that it is right for her to be subjugated to her husband. Given these premises, it might happen that she reaches a much higher utility level in staying home, performing household work, with no other available option in life, than another woman who lives in a wealthy and liberal society, is formally free to pursue any life path, but is deeply unsatisfied because she has not been able to live up to her expectations. We could think of another woman, for example, who has entertained for all her youth the dream of becoming a famous chef. She has spent many years studying for it and has sacrificed her private life. But after many failures, she has been unable to fulfil her plans for life and has finally ended up doing a more modest job in a restaurant. Assume also that, for all the reasons stated above, this second woman—let’s call her Claudia—experiences constant anger and frustration. Therefore, despite being substantially poorer and constrained in the life choices available to her, Francesca is more satisfied than Claudia.

Now, imagine that you have to decide whether to allocate an extra benefit **B** to the first or to the second woman. Here, we might have two possible scenarios. In the first one, benefit **B** yields more utility if it is assigned to Claudia. This might happen, for example, if the beneficial effect of **B** on Claudia’s frustration—think of **B** as a holiday, or as extra money for shopping, or something similar— is superior to the marginal increase in happiness that Francesca might have with **B**. In this case,

¹⁹ Consequently, their level of happiness and satisfaction is much higher than it would have been had this process of adaptation not occurred. See also Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 62–63, 67–70; and Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 111–166.

The example of Giulio and Marco is simply a case of utility that does not decrease at the margin, rather than a case of adaptive preferences, because I postulate that they have freely developed their tastes and plans of life.

both utilitarianism and prioritarianism would recommend allocating B to the person with the lower welfare level—Claudia, the restaurant girl—even though she is much wealthier than Francesca.

Conversely, in the second scenario, we assume that Francesca, the happy wife, would get more utility from B than Claudia, the restaurant girl. This may happen if Francesca, despite being better off in terms of welfare, is so much poorer than Claudia that the satisfaction she would get from B—or from the commodities she can buy with it—is higher than the mitigating effect of B on Claudia's burning disillusionment. In this case, utilitarians would privilege the poorer—but happier—person over the wealthier but less satisfied counterpart. In other words, utilitarians would not fall into the trap of adaptive preferences. They would not penalize the persons with fewer resources for the sole fact of not suffering for their condition.

Nonetheless, if in this second scenario we apply the prioritarian clause to the utilitarian principle, we could not unconditionally uphold the utilitarian indication. On the contrary, we might be forced to reverse it if Claudia's weighting factor is high enough to compensate for her disadvantage in the utility produced by benefit B. Consider, for example, that B yields a marginal utility of 14 if given to Francesca ($UF=14$) and of 12 if given to Claudia ($UC=12$), and that Francesca's welfare level corresponds to a weighting factor of 3 while Claudia's welfare level corresponds to a weighting factor of 5. The value of B accruing to Francesca would be $VF=14 \cdot 3=42$, while the value of B accruing to Claudia would be $VC=12 \cdot 5=60$. Therefore, $VC > VF$, and for prioritarians, in this second scenario, B should be given to Claudia, the wealthier person, rather than to the poorer one as utilitarians would maintain.

Cutting a long story short, the problem with utilitarianism is that when the utility of income does not decline at the margin as expected, hence an additional good produces an higher marginal utility if given to a person who has more goods rather than to the one who has less, the utilitarian doctrine tends to favour the wealthier potential recipient of benefits over the poorer one. But the prioritarian amendment can rescue the utilitarian principle from the risk of this moral inconsistency. Whereas, when we are in the presence of adaptive preferences, prioritarianism always penalises the worse off individual, while utilitarianism can recommend allocating a given additional benefit to the worse off individual only on condition that the utility of this benefit does not decline at the margin²⁰.

²⁰ Or in other words, on condition that the person who is poorer but at a higher utility level does obtain more utility from a given additional benefit than a second person who is wealthier but is at a lower utility level. Obviously, this would not entail that under such circumstances utilitarianism has solved the whole problem with adaptive preferences, because independently from the choice related to the allocation of the extra benefit, if you ask a utilitarian to judge which of the two persons is better off, she would still indicate the poorer one. Therefore, even when the utility of a given benefit does not decline at the margin, hence with regards to this benefit a utilitarian would favor the poorer recipient, the criticisms moved by Sen against the utilitarian indifference toward adaptive preferences still hold true. See Sen, *Development*, 62–63.

Does this mean that we should drop both the utilitarian and the prioritarian doctrine? Does this also irreparably undermine the hypothesis that prioritarianism might represent a positive theoretical evolution of the utilitarian theory in safeguarding the interests of those who have fewer assets and capabilities? I do not believe so. For the limits of prioritarianism derive from the fact that this doctrine has generally been equated to welfare-prioritarianism. Nonetheless, the prioritarian basic formulation, initially proposed by Derek Parfit, and according to which ‘benefiting people matters more the worse off these people are’²¹, does leave open the issue of how we should measure, for the purpose of weighting benefits, who is worse off. My point is that if we shift from welfare-prioritarianism—that is, the formulation that in the literature has generally been associated with the wider prioritarian idea—to other variants of prioritarianism that adopt different informational foci²² – as for example resources or capabilities – prioritarianism might perform better than utilitarianism with regard to the poorer people even in the presence of adaptive preferences.

Consider how Nils Holtug automatically proceeds from the general principle of prioritarianism to welfare-prioritarianism. He first offers the following formulation of what he defines as ‘Overall Outcome Welfare Prioritarianism’:

‘An Outcome is intrinsically better, the larger a sum of weighted individual benefits it contains, where benefits are weighted such that they gain a greater value, the worse off the individual to whom they accrue’²³.

Such a principle, taken by itself, is not yet welfarist; rather, it is the analytical formula of the generic prioritarian doctrine. But it becomes welfarist a few lines later when Holtug specifies that prioritarianism ‘ascribes intrinsic values to compound states of affairs’²⁴, each consisting of the size of the benefit and of the welfare level of the individual who receives it. The higher the welfare level, the lower the compound state will be.

As I was arguing before, nothing is granted in the move from Holtug’s formulation of ‘Overall Outcome Welfare Prioritarianism’ to his further specification. Because following Sen’s famous argument, we can judge ‘a person’s position in a social arrangement’ either in terms of realized achievements, means to achievement, or freedom to achieve²⁵. Welfare-prioritarians adopt the first criterion, ascribing a low weighting factor to a person who gets low welfare out of her bundle of resources, independently of how wide this bundle is and how many freedoms she can obtain with the resources at her disposal. The consequence, as we have seen, is that welfare-prioritarianism is presented as a theory that aims to give priority to the worse

²¹ Parfit, ‘Equality and Priority’, 213.

²² ‘informational focus’ is an expression that I borrow from Sen, *Development*, 72.

²³ Holtug, ‘Prioritarianism’, 133.

²⁴ Holtug, ‘Prioritarianism’, 132.

²⁵ Sen, *Inequality*, 31–38. See also Sen, *Development*, 72–76.

off but that ends up exacerbating the utilitarian indifference to poverty when poverty does not result in the level of dissatisfaction that we would normally expect.

A solution for rescuing prioritarianism from this limit can consist—and in my view should consist—in changing the ‘informational focus’ of prioritarianism. It needs to shift from welfare-prioritarianism to two other prioritarian variants that we might label as income-prioritarianism and capability-prioritarianism. I shall place the latter principles in analytical terms by modifying the definition of welfare prioritarianism that Holtug has provided²⁶.

Income-prioritarianism: An Outcome is intrinsically better, the larger a sum of weighted individual benefits it contains, where benefits are weighted such that they gain a greater value, the lower the social income²⁷ of the individual to whom they accrue.

Capability-prioritarianism: An Outcome is intrinsically better, the larger a sum of weighted individual benefits it contains, where benefits are weighted such that they gain a greater value, the less the capabilities of the individual to whom they accrue.

Both versions of prioritarianism would solve the problem that welfare prioritarianism has in relation to adaptive preferences. Yet, capability-prioritarianism might be preferred to income-prioritarianism because it provides a more accurate conception of what it means to be better off. Accordingly, two individuals might control exactly the same basket of resources and yet occupy two different positions in society because either social or individual factors allow them to achieve different functionings, that is to say things they may have reasons to value having or being²⁸. Consider, for example, two persons who have the same income but different chances to get a job they might wish for or different recreational opportunities because one of them happens to live in a liberal society, while the other lives in authoritarian regime. Or consider also two individuals who live in the same place, control the same income, but live two very different lives because one of them suffers from severe disabilities.

On the other hand, income-prioritarianism might be preferred to capability-prioritarianism because it resorts to an informational focus that is easier to calculate; hence, it renders the theory more promptly utilizable by policymakers. In other words, calculating how many resources a given individual controls is much easier than estimating in which different combinations of functionings she can convert the resources she has.

²⁶ See Holtug, ‘Prioritarianism’, 133.

²⁷ The social income of an individual refers to the sum of all the sources of income she can obtain in society: from the state (through money transfers or through services), from private employers (both in terms of wages and of benefits), from the family, from the community, from self-production, and from private activities. See Guy Standing, ‘Labor Recommodification in the Global Transformation’, in *Reading Karl Polanyi for the Twenty-First Century: Market Economy as a Political Project*, eds. Ayse Buğra and Kaan Agartan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 69.

²⁸ Sen, *Development*, 70–76.

More specifically, in income-prioritarianism, each person is assigned, for evaluative purposes, a weighting factor that is inversely proportional to the amount of resources she happens to control, without taking into consideration how much welfare she manages to get from them. In this way, if person A controls more resources than person B, the former could never have a lower weighting factor than the latter, regardless of any subjective distortion in evaluation due to adaptive preferences. Capability-prioritarianism would follow the same logic. The only difference is that it would adopt a broader informational focus, thus enlarging the conception of poverty. It would take into consideration, for the assignment of weighting factors, the freedom to achieve things that a person ‘may value doing or being’²⁹. Therefore, in our previous example, Claudia (the restaurant girl) could never been given a higher weighting factor than Francesca (the happy wife) – something that could happen, instead, with income-prioritarianism if Francesca, although being denied some basic liberties in her patriarchal society, controlled more resources than Claudia.

I believe that both income-prioritarianism and capability-prioritarianism are preferable to welfare-prioritarianism—and to utilitarianism—for the reasons discussed so far. Hence, both theories might be considered for adoption. Capability-prioritarianism is a stronger bulwark for the worse off than income-prioritarianism, but I would concede that some would prefer to trade the accuracy of the former for the simplicity of the latter, especially when distributive principles are called in to guide public policies and political projects. For the sake of simplicity, in this article I shall continue to consider prioritarianism in its capability version, always bearing in mind that what I will argue about capability-prioritarianism from now on can also be applied, although in a more restricted way, to the income version.

3. FROM PRIORITY TO SUFFICIENCY

Capability-prioritarianism has the advantage, over utilitarianism, of giving priority to the poorer individuals even when utility does not decrease at the margin. It has the advantage, over welfare-prioritarianism, of not being in the grip of mental distortions stemming from adaptive preferences. It also has the advantage—like every other version of prioritarianism—over telic egalitarianism, of being immune to the levelling down objection³⁰.

²⁹ Sen, *Development*, 75. For a brief discussion about how the capabilities have been used in practice for the purpose of well-being assessment see Ingrid Robeyns, ‘The Capability Approach in Practice’, *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (2006): 360-373.

³⁰ Telic egalitarianism is the view according to which equality is intrinsically good on its own. Hence, a first distribution is at least in one respect better than a second one if it is more equal. The consequence is that for a telic egalitarian it is better in one respect to lower the conditions of the better off if we cannot ameliorate the situation of the worse off. Parfit has defined this move as ‘leveling down’. See Parfit, ‘Equality and Priority’, 210-212.

Nonetheless, the challenge of aggregation persists even in capability-prioritarianism. Thus, any individual, no matter how well off she might be, is never assigned a weighting factor that is equal to zero. This means that even the benefits accruing to the wealthiest individual in the world matter in the global calculus of value. Hence, we cannot exclude the possibility of trade-offs between the top and the bottom of society, such that a huge set of benefits accruing to a large number of the former can outweigh a small set of benefits distributed among the latter. This is a limit, in my view, because it makes prioritarianism structurally incapable of dealing with inequalities that the best off seek to defend, at the expenses of the worst off, on the grounds of value aggregation.

Supporters of the prioritarian view might object that I am referring to purely speculative cases, because such undesirable trade-offs can only occur under the condition that we were unable to do anything other than choose between allocating huge benefits to many from the top or allocating small benefits to a few from the bottom. For when we are relatively free to intervene in the distribution, prioritarianism would demand that we drive the benefits towards the worse off in order to maximize the overall value³¹. Nonetheless, I believe that the case of the transversal trade-off should not be lightly dismissed, because we are not always free to assign benefits to whoever we wish, and in many cases we are obliged to make black-or-white choices—more so if we extend the prioritarian principle to the global level³².

In order to clarify this point, imagine that a small group of children living in a developing country is forced, because of dire economic conditions, to mine a material that is used in micro quantities in the production of smartphones and tablets.

So imagine that in our example benefit B was a ski holiday and that Francesca did not know how to ski while Claudia did. Both utilitarians and prioritarians would recommend giving B to Claudia, if Francesca cannot get any utility out of it. Meanwhile, telic egalitarians would be forced to admit that, at least in one respect, it would be preferable to renounce allocating B instead of giving it to Claudia, hence increasing the distance between the two women. (Obviously this would occur under the assumption that the telic egalitarian were interested in equality of resources, with regards to which Claudia is better off than Francesca - if the telic egalitarian were interested in equality of welfare, with regards to which Francesca is better off than Claudia, we would have to reverse the ski example).

³¹ The problem with prioritarianism is that it would remain indifferent to two outcomes that make the same contribution to the overall value, even if in one outcome the whole marginal value is produced by many at the top and in the second it is produced by a few the bottom - assuming that we had no other solution but to choose between one of the two options.

³² At this point, it might be interesting to wonder whether prioritarianism and sufficientarianism are theories of distributive justice that are necessarily global in scope. The great majority of their proponents seem to maintain this view (see, for example, Parfit, 'Equality and Priority', 214; and Robert Huseby, 'Sufficiency: Restated and Defended', *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 18, no. 2 [2010]: 279). Nonetheless, I believe that whether you take into consideration the utility, priority, or sufficiency of every living (or even future) person or rather you are simply interested in the members of a given group depends on the second-order issue of whether you are cosmopolitan or rather nationalist about justice. This is an issue that precedes the debate on utilitarianism, prioritarianism, or sufficientarianism and can only be resolved separately. Therefore, I would say that there is no theoretical contradiction in proposing statist versions of prioritarianism or sufficientarianism.

Assume also that this job is extremely hazardous because of the consequences on children's health and that, on the other hand, smartphones and tablets are the vectors of a considerable portion of the world economy that includes apps, e-commerce, communication, and so on (in a few words, a lot of jobs and a lot of money). Shall we tolerate that these children shoulder the burden of the wealth of a large group of people living in developed countries, even though this means spending their lives in obnoxious conditions? If the group of children is small and the sector of the world economy based on smartphones and tablets is huge enough, prioritar-ians would justify this practice³³. Imagine that we need to choose between allocating some resources to 50 child miners who are providing the precious material to company X in order to lead them to less miserable conditions, and not allocating these resources to these children. If these additional resources would make the children unwilling to continue working in an unsafe place, thus causing an immediate shock for company X, that would hurt its business³⁴ and might result in a loss of welfare for thousands of employees, then not only from an utilitarian prospective but also from a prioritarian one we might still have reasons to prevent the children from shifting from 'miserable' to 'less miserable' conditions³⁵.

In other words, prioritarianism may allow for a trade-off between those who benefit from the extraction of the precious material and the children. For the numerical difference between the former and the latter may call off the egalitarian mechanism that is implicit in prioritarianism and that in this case consists in the children having much higher weighting factors of utilities than their counterparts. Even though the children are really bad off, either in terms of welfare, resources or capabilities, hence their weighting factors are extremely high, the fact that they are only 50 may render the action of benefiting them sub-optimal from the point of view of maximised aggregative value³⁶.

A solution to this drawback of the prioritarian theory might consist in excluding the better off from the aggregative calculus of overall value. This might be realized by introducing a threshold, so that all individuals above it have a weighting factor that is never higher than zero. In this way, we would impose a sufficientarian clause

³³ However, prioritar-ians might be pluralist. They might hold that in my example other values—such as freedom from exploitation—matter. So, they might be ready to sacrifice an outcome with a higher value, obtained by exploiting children, for an outcome with a lower one, in which there is no exploitation. But in every case they would be forced to argue that the first outcome is at least in one respect preferable to the second one. See also Holtug, 'Prioritarianism', 132.

³⁴ We are assuming that company X would need time to adjust to the loss of the child miners.

³⁵ On this issue, see also the famous example of the World Cup final that Casal recently readapted from T. M. Scanlon. See Casal 'Why Sufficiency', 320; and Thomas M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 235.

³⁶ Here I make no distinction between the different versions of prioritarianism because it would not substantially alter my conclusions, in the sense that by changing the currency of justice we would not reverse the inequalitarian tendency that the axiological principle of prioritarianism shows in this situation.

to the prioritarian principle³⁷. And it is also interesting to note how this restriction to the aggregative imperative that prioritarianism inherits from utilitarianism is introduced at the price of rendering the outcomes of utility functions even more unequal than in prioritarianism. For while prioritarianism holds that individual utilities are not the same, but they matter more the worse off the person who produces them is, the sufficientarian threshold adds the stricter provision that some utilities—those of the better off—are excluded from the calculation of overall value. In this sense, as we move from utilitarianism towards a distributive principle that better sustains the equality of resources or capabilities, we progressively mitigate the ‘hidden form of egalitarianism’ that Sen ascribed to the utilitarian doctrine.

The idea of the sufficientarian threshold was initially proposed by Harry Frankfurt when he addressed the advocates of economic equality, holding that many of them were mistaking a quantitative consideration for a qualitative one. Frankfurt’s hypothesis is that many egalitarians intuitively declare considering inequality as unacceptable in itself, but what really disturbs many of them is not that some people have less than some others, rather, they worry that a given group of individuals has too little and lives below a sufficiency threshold³⁸.

But what does it mean to reach a sufficiency threshold? This threshold, Frankfurt says, should be interpreted as a standard rather than a limit. In the sense that the person who meets the standard would surely prefer to have more money than she has, but she has no ‘active interest’ in getting more. This condition may arise under two circumstances: when the person has enough money not to be dissatisfied with her life, or when she is dissatisfied but this does not depend on economic reasons³⁹. Therefore, Frankfurt proposed a single and subjective utility threshold to delimit the field of action of justice. The only thing that matters is to lead every individual above the sufficiency threshold, and obviously the farther a person is from the sufficiency threshold the stronger will be the urgency of driving resources toward her. Meanwhile, all the benefits accruing to people above the threshold have no value for the distributive calculation. Hence, they cannot be traded with the benefits going to people below the threshold⁴⁰.

However, the idea of the sufficiency threshold can be interpreted—and in fact, it has been subsequently interpreted—in many different ways⁴¹. A sufficiency threshold can be either subjective or objective, single or multiple, and when we have multiple thresholds, they can be laid in a vertical or horizontal order. Regarding the first distinction, an example of a threshold that we might define as objective, because it is not based on a self-evaluation—as in the work of Frankfurt—but rather relies on a

³⁷ We might say that the sufficientarian threshold re-amends prioritarian-amended utilitarianism.

³⁸ See Frankfurt, ‘Equality’, 34.

³⁹ Frankfurt, ‘Equality’, 39–43.

⁴⁰ Differently from prioritarianism.

⁴¹ For an analysis of the non-instrumental reasons that might support a sufficiency threshold, see Liam Shields, ‘The Prospects for Sufficientarianism’, *Utilitas* 24, no. 2 (2012): 112–114.

third-person perspective, is the one proposed by Roger Crisp. More precisely, in Crisp's view, the sufficiency threshold corresponds to the welfare level at which the compassion of an impartial spectator gives out. The idea of the virtuous, or impartial spectator, is meant to indicate a model in which a third person examines in a neutral way the situation of those participating in a scheme of redistribution. In conjunction with the notion of compassion, the model of the impartial spectator can suggest an absolute threshold. All those for whom the impartial spectator feels compassion are below the threshold; all the others are above it⁴².

In Crisp's sufficientarianism, individuals below the threshold are to be given absolute priority over those above it in the distribution of benefits. Below the threshold, those who are far from it have a relative priority over those who are closer to it. What happens among those above the threshold is irrelevant, but one solution, Crisp says, might be to introduce a form of utilitarianism among those who are above sufficiency only for the purpose of regulating their interactions. However, no trade-offs would be allowed across the threshold. The only exception would relate to what Crisp defines as 'trivial' benefits: a trivial benefit below the threshold does not have priority over a non-trivial one above the threshold⁴³.

Second, other sufficientarian philosophers have felt the need to employ more than one threshold vertically. Robert Huseby, for example, has combined an objective minimal threshold that corresponds to the fulfilment of 'basic human needs'⁴⁴, interpreted mainly as food, shelter, clothing, and physical security, with a subjective maximal sufficiency threshold, which is similar to the one employed by Frankfurt and 'equals to a level of welfare with which a person is content'⁴⁵.

More generally, Huseby's sufficientarian scheme works in this way. All those below the maximal threshold should have absolute priority over those above it. Between the maximal threshold and the minimal one there should be a sort of prioritarianism. Benefits should be weighted on the distance of the recipient from the maximal threshold. Lastly, a 'strong' priority should apply to those below the minimal threshold—something less stringent than absolute priority but more radical than standard prioritarian weighing⁴⁶.

Meanwhile, David Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen have preferred to distinguish between different objective thresholds horizontally, referring to central human

⁴² Roger Crisp, 'Equality, Priority and Compassion', *Ethics* 113, no. 4 (2003): 755–757.

⁴³ Crisp, 'Equality, Priority', 758.

⁴⁴ Huseby, 'Sufficiency', 180.

⁴⁵ Huseby, 'Sufficiency', 181. However, talking about contentment with individual welfare opens up a huge problem with regard to those people who have expensive tastes. So, Huseby says that one solution to this conundrum consists in replacing 'contentment' with 'a reasonable chance of being content'. Huseby, 'Sufficiency', 182.

Moreover, Huseby's maximal sufficiency threshold is also influenced by relative deprivation, because relativities have a psychological impact on individual contentedness. Huseby, 'Sufficiency', 183.

⁴⁶ Huseby, 'Sufficiency', 184–185.

capabilities that go from the classical basic needs—such as food, health, and education—to more complex ones—such as political freedom, social respect, and so on. A person reaches sufficiency, in their view, when she is free from pressure against succeeding in each central capability⁴⁷. So, no matter how positive the self-evaluation of wellbeing of the happy wife of my example could be, she would never be considered above sufficiency unless she meets all the separate sufficiency thresholds that Axelsen and Nielsen indicate as basic⁴⁸.

For the various reasons expressed so far, I would tend to consider an impartial version of sufficiency, either based on a third-person prospective or referring to some capabilities that enshrine basic interests, as preferable to subjective thresholds that, being based on personal contentment, run the risk to falling prey to adaptive preferences or to expensive tastes – as exemplified in the cases of Francesca-Claudia and Giulio-Marco, respectively.

4. QUIESCENT SUFFICIENCY

Up until this point, I have discussed why by first applying either the income-prioritarian or the capability-prioritarian clause to utilitarianism and by later introducing one or more impartial sufficiency thresholds, we obtain a distributive principle that preserves the advantages of both utilitarianism and prioritarianism, while correcting for some of their most severe drawbacks that penalize poorer persons. The advantages of both utilitarianism and prioritarianism are clarity in moral prescription, consequentialism and impartiality in moral aggregation, while the disadvantages are, respectively, to point toward an unequal distribution of resources when utility does not decrease at the margin (in the case of utilitarianism) and the inability to prevent dramatic trade-offs between the top and the bottom of society (which is more evident in utilitarianism but can also characterise prioritarianism when there is a large numerical disparity between the better off and the worse off).

Nonetheless, one might still object that an important difference exists between simple prioritarianism and sufficiency-amended prioritarianism with regards to the way we conceive of priority among those who are below the sufficiency threshold. For while prioritarians would hold that we ought to allocate resources to the worse

⁴⁷ They use the expression ‘freedom from duress’. David V. Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen, ‘Sufficiency as Freedom from Duress’, *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 23, no. 4 (2015): 406–409.

Moreover, Axelsen and Nielsen also argue that while certain thresholds only require an evaluation of absolute positions, for some others we should also look at relativities. The vote, for example, is a ‘positional good’, whose absolute relevance is dependent on the absolute number of votes that all the other people are allowed to express. Axelsen and Nielsen, ‘Freedom from Duress’, 419–421. See also the more recent Lasse Nielsen and David V. Axelsen, ‘Capabilitarian Sufficiency: Capabilities and Social Justice’, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 18, no. 1 (2017): 46–59.

⁴⁸ See Axelsen and Nielsen, ‘Freedom from Duress’, 410–411.

off in every case, sufficientarians might maintain that when resources are scarce—and hence we cannot lead everyone above the threshold in the short run—it might be more important to lead closer to sufficiency those individuals who are not far from it rather than those others who are so poor that we have less reason to expect that they will manage to reach sufficiency on their own.

Consider, for example, a case in which A controls 20 units of resources, B owns 28, C owns 65, and the sufficiency threshold is fixed at 70 units of resources. Assume that you have only three units to allocate and you have to decide where to place them. Prioritarians would have no doubts that A should be given priority. With sufficientarians, the discourse is more complex. In those cases in which the process of redistribution is constant, I think that the great majority of sufficientarians would agree with prioritarians on the urgency of giving extra resources to those who fare worse. Whereas, if we can reasonably expect that no other additional resources will be available for redistribution in the near future, and that the recipients are not likely to substantially ameliorate their conditions without external intervention⁴⁹, sufficientarians might deem it more urgent to bring C very close to the sufficiency threshold rather than give priority to the worse off, as prioritarians would recommend⁵⁰.

I recognize that this difference can exist and hence that sufficiency-amended prioritarianism might entail a modification of the prioritarian logic below the threshold. Nonetheless, I believe that we would not incur any theoretical contradiction if we hold that sufficientarianism remains open to the two different normative strategies in those cases in which resources are limited—that is, either the maximization of value at all costs or the priority to those who are more likely to reach the sufficiency threshold.

However, the irreconcilable difference between prioritarianism and sufficientarianism, the one that many identify as being the biggest limit of the latter, is the indifference to inequalities occurring above the threshold. For if up to a certain threshold

⁴⁹ Imagine, for example, the case of aid intervention with very limited resources, in an area lashed by dire poverty.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Edward Page, 'Justice Between Generations: Investigating a Sufficientarian Approach', *Journal of Global Ethics* 3, no. 1 (2007): 9. See also the 'headcount claim' discussed by Shields with regards to some sufficientarian theories, and according to which 'benefits to those who do not reach the threshold do not improve the assessment of the distribution'. Shields, 'The Prospects', 102–103.

A different case would be that in which you are dealing with a life-or-death situation and you have limited resources. Hence, you have to decide whether to ameliorate the condition of the worse off, without saving their lives, or guarantee the survival of the better off. Consider a re-elaboration of my previous example, in which you have five rather than three resources to give, and 70 is the minimum for staying alive. Here I believe sufficientarians would want to give five resources to C (see Frankfurt, 'Equality', 30–31), and prioritarians would do the same, because even though C has a lower weighting factor than both A and B, the marginal increase of utility yielded by five additional resources is much higher on C's utility function than on those of A or B.

individual weighting factors become equal to zero, we lose any axiological leverage. Various solutions can be proposed to the problem of how we regulate the distribution above sufficiency. One solution, as postulated by Crisp, might consist in applying a separate distributive principle above the threshold. Crisp, for example, suggested using utilitarianism⁵¹.

Another possible solution might be to employ negative weighting factors above the threshold⁵², that are closer to zero the lower the income level of the persons they refer to, and vice versa. In this way, we would have a form of positive priority below the threshold and a form of negative priority above it. Also above the threshold the value of a benefit would be given by the utility weighted on a weighting factor that is inversely proportional to the income level of the recipient, but given that all the weighting factors above the threshold would be lower than zero, there could never be a trade-off between a person above sufficiency and a person below it.

I believe that both strategies can result in workable principles of justice, but they would contradict the core of the sufficientarian doctrine—initially developed in antithesis to egalitarianism—according to which justice only requires that everyone has enough⁵³. Yet, I maintain that a possibility exists for rescuing sufficientarianism from the allegation of indifference to all inequalities occurring above sufficiency—let’s call it “the indifference objection”⁵⁴—without contradicting the original sufficientarian spirit. It consists in holding that justice only requires that everyone has enough as long as everyone has obtained enough. According to this view, absolute priority would be granted to those below sufficiency, with capability-prioritarianism regulating the priority in the below-sufficiency group, and any inequality in the above-sufficiency group would remain outside the scope of justice. But when no one is left below the threshold, the sufficiency principle will become dormant and we could shift to whatever other principle of justice we deem correct for regulating society under the new contingencies.

⁵¹Crisp, ‘Equality, Priority’, 758. Consider also the hybrid formulation of sufficientarian egalitarianism proposed by Andrew Williams. Within this doctrine, luck egalitarianism holds as the general principle of justice, with the restriction that any form of option luck can justify any person being left below a minimum level of welfare. See Andrew Williams, ‘Liberty, Equality, and Property’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, eds. John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig and Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 501–503.

⁵² While sufficientarians do usually hold that weighting factors are equal to zero, here I refer to weighting factors preceded by the minus sign.

⁵³ In the sense that we can technically introduce an additional distributive principle, but in so doing we would end up outside the sufficientarian field. Whereas, Philipp Kerschinger has defended the idea that sufficientarianism is reconcilable with progressive taxation by appealing to the risk of falling below the threshold. Accordingly, it would not be incoherent, from a sufficientarian prospective, to tax less those who are closer to the sufficiency threshold. Yet, I am not sure that the proponents of the sufficientarian view on justice would accept the normative relevance of being at risk of insufficiency. See Philipp Kerschinger, ‘Why Sufficientarianism is not Indifferent to Taxation’, *Kriterion - Journal of Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (2015): 89–98.

⁵⁴ Shields, ‘The Prospects’, 106.

Interpreted in this way, sufficientarianism would be conceived of as an emergency principle of justice that we adopt to grant absolute priority to those people who experience extraordinary deprivation. We might call this form of sufficientarianism that I am proposing here as quiescent sufficientarianism. More than a generic principle of justice, quiescent sufficientarianism is a temporary distributive principle aimed at accomplishing a specific objective: enabling all members of society to meet a basic wellbeing threshold. In other words, sufficiency should not simply be seen as a regulative ideal aimed at guiding political choices, the way that priority, utility, and equality are. Rather, it should be viewed as an achievable goal, consisting in correcting for a more urgent form of injustice: living below sufficiency.

Naturally, quiescent sufficientarianism would not be able to meet the indifference objection in its entirety, because even with this version of sufficiency we would be unable to condemn inequalities above the threshold as long as at least one person is still below it. Nonetheless, I hold that such indifference can be understood and justified from the point of view of quiescent sufficiency, and I will try to explain why with an example. For the sake of simplicity, imagine a society with only three persons, in which person A controls 20 units of wealth, B controls 40 units, and C controls 50 units, while the sufficiency threshold is set at 25. According to quiescent sufficiency, we should remain indifferent, from the point of view of justice, about whether the gap between B and C becomes wider or narrower as long as A remains below 25.

I believe that this conclusion is not unreasonable. Assume that we have the chance of allocating four extra units of resources. It is irrelevant to ponder whether it is more just to give them to the second wealthiest or the wealthiest person, because first we ought to help the poorest one to come closer to the sufficiency threshold. We might incur the problem of indifference only in those cases in which we are unable to reach person A or she cannot convert the resources into wellbeing⁵⁵. When this happens we have to bite the bullet and accept that C can increase the gap with B without committing an injustice. Whereas, if we have six units to redistribute, we first ought to allocate five units to A so that she can meet the sufficiency threshold, but at this point the sufficiency principle would become dormant, so the allocation of the remaining unit would be regulated by the non-emergency distributive principle that we have previously chosen.

It might still be objected that even within disposable sufficiency the indifference problem might bring about cases of moral inconsistency, because we might lack reasons for preferring an outcome in which A is led to sufficiency by drawing resources from B rather than from C or by allocating new ones. So, for example, with the sufficiency threshold remaining set at 25, if we start from the previous Status quo (A20, B40, C 50), Outcome 1 (A 23, B 37, C 50) would be as just as Outcome

⁵⁵ This latter case can occur if A cannot consume the resources we are distributing—for medical reasons for example—and she cannot convert them into cash on the market either.

2 (A 23, B 40, C 50) and Outcome 3 (A 23, B 40, C 53). This is true. As long as the sufficiency regime holds, a sacrifice from a person barely above sufficiency might be considered at par with an equal sacrifice from another person who is well above the threshold. Nonetheless, three things can be said to partially defend this sufficientarian radicality. The first one is that such horizontality in the responsibility to help persons in dire need might render the transfer of resources more fluid and efficient. So, in our example, B could not appeal to C's reluctance to redistribute to A as an excuse for inaction. In some way, this feature of sufficientarianism could oblige the person who could quickly direct resources below the threshold to do it.

The second point, which is also connected to the first one, is that even if B renounces something in order to let A reach the threshold, while C maintains her position unaltered, when sufficiency will become dormant B will be poorer than C than she was earlier, and this can count for the non-emergency principle of justice, hence we might expect B to reduce the gap with C in the post-sufficiency scenario. Consider, for example, Outcome 1 (A 23, B 37, C 50) and Outcome 3 (A 23, B 40, C 53). Even though C can increase her gap with B in the pre-sufficiency scenario without incurring in injustice, once the sufficiency principle will go into abeyance the post-sufficiency principle of justice may require a redistribution from C to B. In this sense, we might say that Outcome 1 and Outcome 3 are on a par only as long as A will control less than 25 resources.

Lastly, a clause could be added, so that after the adoption of the quiescent-sufficiency paradigm, no one can be asked to renounce something she had earlier if the pace of economic growth is high enough to achieve the sufficiency goal in the short run. So, under this clause, if we start from the Status quo (A 20, B 40, C 50), Outcome 1 (A 23, B 37, C 50) can no longer be considered at par with Outcome 2 (A 23, B 40, C 50), but the latter, if achievable, should be preferred.

As we can see, the great difference between quiescent sufficiency and classical sufficiency is that in the former the negative thesis, according to which inequalities occurring among people above sufficiency are irrelevant from the point of view of justice, holds true only as long as someone is still below the sufficiency threshold. When everyone has finally met the threshold, it will go into abeyance, ready to be reactivated in case even just one person once again falls below sufficiency. Another way to figure out the difference between quiescent sufficiency and classic sufficiency is to imagine what would happen if with a magic wand we were able to carry everyone above sufficiency. As followers of classic sufficiency, we would have to remain indifferent, from the prospective of justice, about everything that occurs in this hypothetical world. Accordingly, we could not even sanction a possible social evolution in which one single individual accumulates most of existing wealth, while all the other human beings remain just above sufficiency – in this scenario, it might be in the interest of the richest individual to redistribute to all the others just enough resources to keep them above the threshold, so as to neutralise any sufficientarian

demand⁵⁶. Whereas, if we have adhered to quiescent sufficiency, in the post-sufficiency world, we can oppose inequalities through the non-emergency axiological principle of justice that comes into play once the sufficiency principle has been put into abeyance.

Yet, it could be counter-argued that people might continuously cross the threshold; therefore, the non-emergency distributive principle could never be triggered and, in practice, there would not be any difference between quiescent sufficientarianism and classic sufficientarianism. This is why I previously suggested that sufficiency should not be simply considered as a (temporary) distributive principle. Rather, it should be seen as a reformist political project that can only be realised with the creation of public institutions aimed at sustaining sufficiency over time.

Once the ‘central aspects of human life’⁵⁷ have been individuated and agreed upon—I think, for example, of healthcare, nutrition, schooling, housing, and so on—we should introduce supplementary public institutions that can guarantee basic capabilities with regards to every aspect that we consider as central to all those people who fail to do so on their own through market mechanism. If these public institutions work efficiently, there are good chances that sufficiency will be guaranteed to everyone in the long run. We could then shift to the non-emergency principle of distributive justice. In sum, achieving sufficiency should be considered as an accomplishable political transformation in which the interests of those above sufficiency cannot take any priority over the creation of the institutions aimed at guaranteeing stable sufficiency to those who still fall short of it.

A different objection that might be raised against the account of sufficiency I am proposing here consists in the fact that it could never be conclusively put into abeyance, hence we could not sustain the post-sufficiency distributive principle for a long period, because what is needed to achieve sufficiency changes with time. A clear example of this is the internet. Until a few years ago a credible threshold of sufficiency would not have included internet access, while nowadays many people would perceive as inadequate a condition in which they were denied the possibility to get their devices connected to the web, because they could not be properly informed about what happens in the world, could not communicate with the loved ones who live far (or perhaps migrated), could not take part to some forms of participatory

⁵⁶ Consider that this hypothetical situation is not so different from the case of small elites ruling in oil-rich countries and redistributing wealth to the population through financing welfare state provisions. This is also in order to guarantee stability to their own regime. See, for example, Laura El-Katiri, Bassam Fattouh and Paul Segal, ‘Anatomy of an Oil-Based Welfare State: Rent Distribution in Kuwait’, in *The Transformation Of the Gulf: Politics, Economics And the Global Order*, eds. David Held and Kristian C. Ulrichsen (Abingdon – UK: Routledge, 2011).

⁵⁷ Axelsen and Nielsen, ‘Freedom from Duress’, 406.

democracy through which small communities may happen to tackle collective problems⁵⁸.

This example is particularly effective, because it shows that in order to achieve sufficiency it is not enough to give people purchasing power, rather you also need to create the conditions for the goods needed for sufficiency to be achievable and affordable. In this case, the social duty consists in the first place in the construction of the infrastructures through which data can be transmitted, and in the second place in rendering the costs of connection affordable for the worst off.

This being the case, it can be argued that a person who reached sufficiency 30 years ago, because provided with the resources for health, food, shelter, and so on, might end up below the sufficiency threshold some decades later, because even though her welfare level has not changed, the sufficiency threshold has moved up to incorporate internet access, and this person happens to live in a place where infrastructures are so poor that internet is not accessible at a reasonable price. In this case, given that the threshold has changed, we need to reactivate sufficiency, hence a sufficiency threshold cannot be conclusively put into quiescent mode⁵⁹.

The objection is correct and it captures the temporal dimension of my proposal, meaning that any sufficiency threshold, be it impartial or subjective, may change with time. Accordingly, with ‘quiescent’ I refer to the fact that in the period of time $t0-t1$ we employ threshold T , and in this period of time sufficiency is met, and hence its correlative threshold can go into abeyance mode, only if every person who is alive reaches T . Yet, as we have seen, at time $t1$ the emergence of new needs may lead us to the conclusion that T should be replaced with $T1$. When this occurs without T having been put into abeyance mode, because some people still fall short of it, we simply replace an operative T with an operative $T1$. If, on the contrary, T was already dormant, we simply introduce a new sufficiency threshold $T1$, that will remain in place from time $t1$ to time $t2$, until either $T1$ will be replaced by $T2$ (which takes into account some new needs that still have to emerge) or $T1$ will get into abeyance mode.

This last aspect is particularly important. Let’s consider, for example, the situation in which T is already dormant, hence we have adopted a different principle of distributive justice for allocating burdens and benefits of social cooperation, say a form of egalitarianism, and we realise that our previous benchmark for sufficiency is now ‘insufficient’ and that we need to refer to $T1$, for the reasons related to internet access that we were discussing before. When this occurs, helping those who lack

⁵⁸ It is not a case that an addition was recently made to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to recognise the importance of sharing information through the web. See Catherine Howell and Darrell M. West, ‘The Internet as a human right’, *The Brookings Institution* (November 7, 2016), retrievable from: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2016/11/07/the-internet-as-a-human-right/>.

⁵⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for articulating such an objection, specifically referring to the case of the Internet.

internet access to get it will become our unique concern, meaning that any resource that will be employed for something different will give rise to an injustice. Here we can make sense of the radicality of quiescent sufficiency (in comparison to other non-sufficientarian accounts of justice that eschew the ‘indifference objection’), because it will temporarily establish a state of emergency that would not allow for any trade-off between those who are above and those who are below the threshold that is in force in the period $t1-t2$.

There remains to consider one last issue. In this article, and in particular in the last part of it, I have mainly centred my analysis on what is supposed to occur above the threshold, given that my main target has been to rescue sufficientarianism from the ‘indifference objection’. In doing this, I have considered some possible theoretical evolutions, in the interests of the worst off, firstly from utilitarianism to welfare-prioritarianism, secondly from welfare-prioritarianism to either income- or capability-prioritarianism, thirdly from income- or capability-prioritarianism to classic sufficientarianism, and lastly from classic sufficientarianism to quiescent sufficientarianism.

My final argument is that the most effective way to guarantee priority to the worst off, preventing trade-offs between the top and the bottom and at the same time retaining axiological leverage above the threshold, is to uphold a temporary sufficiency threshold (or multiple thresholds) and to guarantee absolute priority to those people who are below it while letting capability-prioritarianism regulate the interactions between them. Yet, it might be wondered why I am proposing capability-prioritarianism to regulate the interactions among the worst off if in my discussion I have presented the evolution from prioritarianism – in any of its variants – to sufficientarianism as a positive advance for the same worst off.

As discussed in the example of the child miners, the reason why none of the prioritarian variants can unconditionally guarantee priority to the worst off is that it will always remain possible for a large group of the best off obtaining huge benefits to outweigh a restricted group of the worst off achieving small increases in wellbeing. The sufficiency threshold neutralises these trade-offs by imposing a zero weighting factor to the utilities accruing at the top. Below the threshold we can have several options: we could employ the utility principle, any of the prioritarian variants or radical sufficiency. The latter is the view according to which sufficiency has intrinsic significance, hence when we have few resources to allocate, our guiding maxim should consist in leading above sufficiency as much individuals as possible.

Reformulating an example I was doing before in pure numerical terms, let us imagine that three persons are in urgent need of a medicine to stop feeling pain. None of them is at risk of dying, but if they do not receive the medicine they will feel pain for the next week, until rescuers will be able to reach them. Adrian is very sick and needs seven doses of medicine to stop his suffering, Julian is sick and needs five doses, Elisabeth is only starting to feel bad now and would need only one dose

not to get worse. We have only two doses at our disposal and we do not know anything about these three persons. We can assume that we are only aware of their specific conditions and we are unable to communicate with them. Who should be given the two doses?

From a strict sufficientarian prospective, Elisabeth should be given at least one dose, so as to lead her above the sufficiency threshold. Whereas, the other dose should be given to Julian, even though this will only lead him closer to sufficiency but not above it, and we know that it is very unlikely that he may find elsewhere the remaining four doses he would necessitate. From a capability-prioritarian prospective, the two doses should instead be given to Adrian in order to make the person who is worst off feel a little better⁶⁰, even though this entails renouncing to carry at least one person above sufficiency.

I am proposing the adoption of capability-prioritarianism below the threshold because, as it has been shown in this example, it can guarantee absolute priority to the worst off, without trade-offs that are internal to the worst off group and might sacrifice the interests of those who are at the very bottom vis-à-vis the worst off who are closer to the sufficiency threshold. This also means that the sufficiency fetishism might have the consequence of justifying inequalities between the most vulnerable individuals of society. Obviously, adopting capability-prioritarianism below sufficiency does not mean to rehabilitate prioritarianism *tout court*, because it can serve the guiding principle I have adopted in this article only if applied below a sufficiency threshold. The guiding principle being to unconditionally safeguard the interests of the worst off⁶¹.

CONCLUSION

I have claimed that utilitarianism could penalize those who are worse off in cases in which utility does not decline at the margin and that the prioritarian clause could solve this problem. Nonetheless, in weighting individual utilities we should not focus on welfare levels, as prioritarian philosophers usually maintain. Rather, we should refer to a scale of weighting factors that is realized in inverse proportion either to social income or to capabilities, because in doing so we can avoid the risk of inegalitarian drifts due to adaptive preferences, to which both utilitarianism and welfare prioritarianism may fall prey.

Then, I have dealt with the issue of trade-offs between the top and the bottom of society that are allowed within prioritarianism. As claimed, the sufficientarian

⁶⁰ The same holds true in the case of welfare-prioritarianism.

⁶¹ I am extremely grateful to two anonymous reviewers for helping me formulate this version of quiescent sufficientarianism, by raising, among other things, many of the objections that I have addressed in this paragraph.

threshold can guarantee an absolute priority to the worse off, but this comes at the price of the negative thesis of sufficientarianism, which can make the whole distributive principle vulnerable to the indifference objection. Therefore, I have posited to interpret sufficientarianism as a temporary principle of distributive justice that remains active as long as insufficiency exists and that becomes dormant once every member of society has crossed the sufficiency threshold. From this perspective, sufficientarianism can be seen as a transformative project for society, aimed at building up the institutions that should safeguard sufficiency over time.

I have sought to argue that we can envision a positive theoretical evolution from utilitarianism to income- or capability-prioritarianism and from income- or capability-prioritarianism to quiescent sufficiency. At each step, we maintain the advantages of the previous theory while correcting for its most explicit drawbacks. In the final analysis, quiescent sufficiency coupled with capability-prioritarianism below the threshold can guarantee absolute priority to the poorest persons under all circumstances, without renouncing the sufficientarian positive thesis and without remaining indifferent to the inequalities that occur among the better off.

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