Thresholds and Limits in Theories of Distributive Justice

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Thresholds and limits in theories of distributive justice

Grenzen en limieten in theorieën van verdelende rechtvaardigheid

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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1 Introduction

In August 2020, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos became the first person ever to be worth over $200 billion. In that same year, the richest 500 people in the world added another $1.8 trillion to their combined wealth, accumulating a total net worth of $7.6 trillion.[1] To put this into perspective, $200 billion is more money than you would have earned had you earned $250.000 a day, every day, since Jesus was born.

However, a different perspective is more important. According to the World Bank, 689 million people lived in extreme poverty in 2015.[2] In 2021, COVID-19, regional conflicts, and climate change are likely to push as many as 150 million people below that threshold. Half of the extremely poor are children. And most of those in extreme poverty are women. All of them are deprived of the means to live a minimally decent life.

These numbers call for action. But they also call for *reflection*. Reflection on the wrongness at play here – and, in particular, on the fact that extreme abundance and extreme deprivation coexist. And reflection on the kind of action that is needed to establish change. One of the aims of political philosophy, as I see it, is to offer such reflection. Which outcomes should we pursue in light of these facts, are current societies effective in doing so, and, if change is needed, where should we go from here?

There is a long-standing tradition in philosophical thought that responds to such questions by saying that it is particularly important that people can meet their basic needs.[3] According to this tradition, poverty is bad because people lack sufficient means to meet some minimal standard.

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[1] These figures are from the Bloomberg Billionaires index. See Ponciano 2020; Pendleton and Witzig 2020.

[2] This figure is provided by the World Bank Group 2020.

[3] See Kramm and Robeyns 2020; see also Pölzler Forthcoming.

In contemporary philosophical debate, this view was first presented by Harry Frankfurt in 1987.[4] According to Frankfurt, what matters most is that someone "is content, or that it is reasonable for him to be content, with having no more money than he has".[5] Moreover, Frankfurt maintains that "if everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others".[6] Frankfurt's view was criticized by both friends and foes of this idea of sufficiency. Some took issue with its threshold, others with its neglect of distributive inequalities above that point.[7] Yet Frankfurt started a powerful idea in contemporary philosophical discourse, namely the idea of *sufficiency*. Societies have distinctive and important duties towards those who lack sufficient means to meet some minimal standard.

Interestingly, Frankfurt himself notes that the concept of 'enough' is used in a different way as well, such as when people say that they have had enough of something.[8] Having enough can also mean that some *limit* has been reached. According to another long-standing tradition in philosophical thought, this idea of excess also offers crucial insight into which outcomes to pursue and where we should go from here given the existence of both abundance and deprivation.[9] Plato, for instance, said that societies' richest members should have at most four or five times as much as their poorest members.[10] Adam Smith thought that failing to cap the insatiable urge for wealth would lead to inequality and civil unrest, which echoes

[4] Cf. Frankfurt 1987.

[5] Frankfurt 1987, 37.

[6] Frankfurt 1987, 21.

[7] E.g. Goodin 1987; Casal 2007; Shields 2012.

[8] Frankfurt 1987, 37.

[9] This is argued in Kramm and Robeyns 2020.

[10] Cf. Plato 1980, 744c-e.

similar arguments made by Plato and Aristotle, among others.[11] And John Stuart Mill argued that excessive wealth, being a luxury, should be redistributed to those who cannot meet their basic needs – a claim also defended by Thomas Aquinas and John Locke.[12]

This idea of excess has some defenders in contemporary philosophical discourse as well. In 1977, the Polish economist Jan Drewnowski argued in favour of an affluence line above which "consumption need not and should not rise".[13] And more recently, Ingrid Robeyns has argued that people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life.[14] But even though such wealth limits play a much smaller role in contemporary discourse about how much people should have than the idea of sufficiency, the claim that some people have too much seems to have increasing traction in public discourse. For instance, one of US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's top aides popularized the slogan "*Every billionaire is a policy mistake*". And the existence of movements such as Occupy Wall Street suggests a growing discontent with rising inequality and the accumulation of wealth by the super-rich. Furthermore, limits play an important role in climate ethics as well, where individual or collective carbon emission limits are widely defended.[15] In that debate, the rich are subject to criticism due to their comparatively high carbon emissions.[16]

Perhaps I can best explain my aim in this thesis as follows. My aim is to illuminate some issues in the philosophical reflection on how income,

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[11] Cf. Smith 1976, 2.710; Plato 2013, 373d; Aristotle 1998, 1279b4.

[12] Cf. Mill 1970, II.II.4.379; Aquinas 1920, II-II.32.5; Locke 2003, 2.31.

[13] Cf. Drewnowski 1978, 264; see also Ramsay 2005.

[14] Cf. Robeyns 2017a.

[15] For example, Holland 2008; Hyams 2009; for an overview, see Green Forthcoming.

[16] On wealth inequality and carbon emissions, see Chancel and Piketty 2015.

wealth, and other valuable goods should be distributed and made available to people. I focus on the role that thresholds play in saying what this requires – in particular, I examine thresholds which denote the point below which people do not have enough and thresholds which denote the point above which they have too much. This thesis, then, revolves around the notions of sufficiency and excess. And it examines the dynamics and functions of thresholds and limits in philosophical theorizing about which outcomes we must pursue, whether current societies are effective in doing so, and, if not, where we should go from here.

1.1 Political philosophy, distributive justice, and thresholds

The strand of theorizing in political philosophy that reflects on the distribution of goods that are important to everyone is that of *distributive justice*.[17] Distributive justice is concerned with the question of which principles should guide the political processes and institutions that affect a society's distribution of benefits and burdens. Such principles specify how scarce resources or products must be allocated in light of people's competing claims and needs regarding those goods. Among several important questions that can be raised about this, such as what should be distributed, who is responsible for doing this, and among whom should we distribute,[18] the question about the *pattern of distributive justice* is the most important one for our purposes.

The pattern of distributive justice specifies what shape the distribution of goods should take. One possible pattern is *egalitarianism*, which

[17] I use 'goods' in a generic way here, referring to whatever can be distributed and matters from the standpoint of justice. This could be money and wealth, freedoms, opportunities, access to goods such as healthcare, work, and education, and so forth. I say more about the metric of justice and its proxies in §1.5.

[18] I discuss these questions in §1.5.

says that people should have equal shares of goods or that deviations from equality must be justified.[19] One alternative to this idea is *prioritarianism*, which says that justice requires a distribution that gives extra weight to worse-off individuals.[20] A different alternative is sufficientarianism, which says that justice requires that people have at least enough of whatever good justice is concerned with.[21] Together, egalitarianism, prioritarianism, and sufficientarianism are the most prominent patterns in the literature on distributive justice.[22]

Of those three patterns, sufficientarianism is the only view which explicitly relies on a threshold. The sufficiency threshold signals the point above which people have enough to meet some minimal standard.[23] However, the idea that sufficientarianism in particular is a threshold view derives at least part of its force from the idea that egalitarianism and prioritarianism are simple rather than complex distributive principles.[24] Most more elaborate versions of those patterns, however, are not *solely* egalitarian or prioritarian. An example of this is that egalitarians too are generally believed to have important and *distinctive*, that is, non-egalitarian,

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[19] Cf. Temkin 2003a; M. O'Neill 2008; Van Parijs 2003.

[20] Cf. Holtug 2007.

[21] Cf. Shields 2019; Shields 2020; Huseby 2019.

[22] Other possible patterns of justice track notions of desert or luck; see, for example, Mankiw 2013; Lippert-Rasmussen 2015. For distributive justice more generally, see Roemer 1996.

[23] There is, however, significant debate about what exactly the threshold denotes and how high that threshold should be. For an overview of this debate, see Huseby 2019.

[24] For instance, Casal (2007, 297) says that sufficiency principles, as opposed to equality and priority principles, "insist that when evaluating different distributions *what matters is whether individuals have enough not to fall below some critical threshold of advantage*" (emphasis mine).

reasons to care about those in extreme poverty.[25] And the same is true for prioritarianism.[26] This suggests, then, that even if thresholds and limits are incompatible with archetypical forms of egalitarianism or prioritarianism, in practice proponents of those views are more ecumenical in the kinds of reasons they draw on to specify how scarce goods must be allocated.

Unlike patterns of distributive justice, some distributive principles work at a more applied level.[27] They do not voice ultimate normative commitments but specify what such commitments entail in specific situations. An egalitarian, for example, believes that goods should be distributed equally. Yet they may also say that if no such distribution is possible, those goods should be distributed as equally as possible or that priority should be given to the worst-off.[28] Recently, Ingrid Robeyns has defended one such distributive principle in the context of wealth and income, namely *limitarianism*.[29] Robeyns argues that as long as some people have unmet urgent needs and wealth can be used to undermine political equality, people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life. This is not an ultimate fundamental principle but a guideline for how societies should be organized given certain facts about the world – such as the facts about extreme poverty, unequal political power, and the accumulation of wealth by the rich. Another distributive principle that works at such an applied level is a variation on sufficientarianism recently

[25] E.g. M. O'Neill 2008.

[26] E.g. Brown 2005.

[27] There is a voluminous literature about 'ideal theory' and 'non-ideal theory' that the issue of applied principles of distributive justice touches upon. I will situate limitarianism in that debate in §4.2 and §5.2. For ideal/non-ideal theory, see Valentini 2012; Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012.

[28] For example, see Räikkä 2019.

[29] See Robeyns 2017a; 2019.

defended by Brian Carey.[30] He argues, like many other sufficientarians, that people should have enough to meet some minimum standard. Yet he does not argue for that idea as some ultimate moral goal, which is how sufficientarianism is commonly interpreted, but because that commitment can be meaningfully pursued in the real world and is shared by proponents of many different types of distributive patterns, such as egalitarianism, prioritarianism, and sufficientarianism.[31] Both limitarianism and such provisional sufficientarianism, as Carey calls it, draw on thresholds to specify what justice requires in the real world.

However, there is still no unifying account of the role that thresholds play in distributive patterns and applied debates in distributive justice. Moreover, there is no account of what sets threshold views apart from non-threshold views, nor of what exactly qualifies a view as a threshold view. All this is not just a lacuna. It is also, and more importantly, a missed opportunity – for instance, it obscures where the conflict between rival distributive patterns really lies, it has fuelled ongoing misunderstandings about distributive thresholds, and it has weakened the prospects for threshold views in distributive justice. My hope is that the papers in this thesis will serve as proof that will show why studying distributive thresholds is important. But let me mention three preliminary reasons why having an account of thresholds is crucial for current debates in distributive justice.

1.2 Why do we need a theory about thresholds in distributive justice?

An account of thresholds in distributive justice defines the *conceptual structure* of distributive views which draw on thresholds. Perhaps an analogy

[30] Cf. Carey 2020.

[31] Cf. Carey 2020, sec. 4. For such a consensus-based argument in a different context, see Carens 1987.

can help to illustrate what exactly I am after here. In a ground-breaking paper that was published in the late '60s, Gerald MacCallum argued that, contrary to the existing literature at the time, there are not two concepts of liberty – namely 'positive liberty' and 'negative liberty' – but only one concept of liberty of which positive liberty and negative liberty are two different specifications.[32] Yet the concept of liberty as such is a single concept. And consequently, any particular *specification* of liberty, such as positive liberty, negative liberty, or another conception of liberty, is a specification of the same *concept* of liberty. According to MacCallum, this insight was crucial because the distinction between positive liberty and negative liberty, because it had been based on confusion, "has drawn attention away from precisely what needs examining"[33] if our aim is to understand what *really* sets proponents of different conceptions of liberty apart. Likewise, I will argue that all threshold views, which include, crucially, sufficientarianism as well as many different specifications of egalitarianism and prioritarianism, are specifications of a single conceptual structure. And like MacCallum, I will argue that this insight is crucial. It draws out attention away from confusion about what sets distributive patterns apart and towards precisely what needs examining when theorizing about distributive justice.

The first reason why such an account of thresholds is crucial is that it helps understand and characterize threshold views in distributive justice. Since many patterns, sufficientarian and otherwise, draw on thresholds, such an account has the potential to show several undertheorized and unrecognized similarities and differences between widely studied patterns of distributive justice. Such an account, then, draws attention to what different distributive patterns have in common by virtue of

[32] See MacCallum 1967.

[33] MacCallum 1967, 312

defending a threshold. And it also sheds light on what it is precisely that distributive patterns disagree about.

To give one example, sufficientarianism is often criticized because of the implausible implications that defending a threshold seems to give rise to.[34] Yet once we see that many other distributive patterns draw on thresholds too, it becomes clear that it is not the threshold as such that is problematic but what exactly sufficientarians say *about* that threshold, such as what they consider to be its precise level or what should happen once people exceed the threshold. So where the conflict really lies is not in the endorsement of thresholds as such but in the endorsement of specific kinds of thresholds.

The second reason why an account of thresholds is crucial for current debates in distributive justice is that it can subsume what may seem to be different debates under one conceptual header. Philosophers working in those different debates can learn from each other how to strengthen their view and respond to criticisms. To illustrate, though sufficientarianism and limitarianism are different views, they face a similar challenge in defining the level of their threshold. As an illustration, the World Bank's global poverty line is used by major global actors to measure progress on global poverty relief goals. But various kinds of concerns arise when trying to define such a poverty threshold. The threshold must resonate with and draw support from the views of those in power in the institutions that can administer and enforce poverty relief programmes. But the threshold must also track *poverty*. The more complex one's conception of poverty, the higher the resulting poverty threshold. Yet the higher this threshold, the lower the likelihood of a widespread agreement on this threshold as a tool for policy design. Even if it is clear which values the threshold must promote, the precise relationship between the threshold and those values is

[34] I discuss this in §3.4 and §3.6.1.

qualified by several distinct but crucial considerations, such as public support and institutional constraints.

Crucially, this problem in determining the poverty threshold resembles a problem that limitarianism faces. Limitarians must say how high their wealth limit should be. Recall that Robeyns argues that the limitarian wealth limit kicks in once people have enough wealth to live a fully flourishing life. Now if we assume that such a flourishing threshold does indeed track the point above which people have too much, normatively speaking, the question is whether there is enough public and political support for that particular limit as a tool for policy design. Perhaps such a threshold is too low to be able to ground such a consensus. Or the concept of 'flourishing' may have too little public support. Hence, because they face a similar challenge in determining the level of the threshold, sufficientarians might learn how to deal with this problem from limitarians, whereas limitarians might draw on insights in the sufficientarian literature on this issue.

In fact, the debates that an account of thresholds in distributive justice can subsume under one conceptual header are not just debates about thresholds. For instance, sufficientarianism says that those below the threshold have priority over those above that threshold. Such priority has been heavily criticized in the literature.[35] But priority rules are not unique to sufficientarianism, nor to threshold views more generally. For example, Rawls famously argued that protecting basic rights and liberties has priority over equalizing opportunities.[36] Once we recognize such a similarity, the question arises if, and if so, why, giving priority to some people and not others is problematic for sufficientarianism in particular. And such a similarity may also suggest that sufficientarians and other proponents of

[35] I elaborate on this in §3.4.2.

[36] E.g. Rawls 1999, 132. For a classical discussion of this priority, see Hart 1983.

threshold views can learn from non-threshold views how to plausibly defend priority rules.

The third reason why an account of thresholds is crucial for current debates in distributive justice is that it can be used to further examine and develop patterns of justice that draw on thresholds, including sufficientarianism and limitarianism. An account of thresholds can function as a 'toolkit' to tailor and improve existing threshold views. For instance, if we can define the conceptual anatomy of a threshold view, we can isolate those elements that invite objections and modify them in light of those objections. As an illustration, sufficientarianism is often rejected on the ground that it gives absolute priority to helping people who do not have enough. But this priority rule that sufficientarianism defends can be changed into a rule which says that we should give some kind of priority to those who do not have enough, but not absolute priority. Hence, if we know what threshold views entail, what they might entail, and what they must reject, we can very precisely modify such views in light of certain desiderata or objections.

1.3 Thresholds, sufficientarianism, and limitarianism

In this collection of papers, I examine thresholds and threshold views in distributive justice, I propose a novel characterization of sufficientarianism, and I situate and defend limitarianism as a principle of distributive justice.

In Chapter 2, titled 'Thresholds in Distributive Justice', I set out to propose a precise and comprehensive account of thresholds and limits in distributive justice. By doing so, I aim to offer the conceptual vocabulary to advance ongoing debates on views that deploy thresholds and to lay the groundwork for the other papers in this thesis. I argue that a threshold consists of three elements. The first element is the level of the threshold, which determines when people are above or below the threshold. The

second element is the nature of the moral value of the threshold. This specifies if it is intrinsically valuable for people to reach that threshold (e.g. because they are free from deprivation if they do) or that reaching that threshold promotes some other goal (e.g. social stability or efficiency). And the third element is made up of the allocative principles which determine how benefits and burdens should be shared among those above and below the threshold.

In that paper, I argue that this account of thresholds has some significant advantages over existing discussions of thresholds. It offers the conceptual vocabulary to specify and explore all possible changes in how valuable goods are distributed and made available to people that thresholds may give rise to. Furthermore, it resolves a common misunderstanding about headcount principles, which are principles that specify that the number of people on a specific side of the threshold should be maximized. For reasons I explain in that paper, there is a received wisdom in the literature that headcounting should be rejected in all but a very narrow set of cases. However, this received wisdom is mistaken, and in fact even some of the fiercest opponents of headcounting should endorse headcount principles, or so I argue.

In Chapter 3, titled 'Justice, Thresholds, and the Three Claims of Sufficientarianism', I propose a novel characterization of sufficientarianism. Sufficientarianism is almost universally defined as combining what is referred to as the 'positive thesis' with either the 'negative thesis' or the 'shift thesis'.[37] However, I argue that sufficientarianism is best

[37] Cf. Casal 2007; Shields 2012. The *positive thesis* holds that it is morally valuable to have enough. The *negative thesis* holds that once people have enough, no further distributive criteria, such as egalitarianism or prioritarianism, apply. And the *shift thesis* holds that once someone has enough, there is a shift in our reasons for benefitting them further.

characterized as combining three claims: a 'continuum claim', a 'priority claim', and a 'deficiency claim'.[38] Together, these claims entail that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits below some threshold over benefits above that threshold. This novel characterization of sufficientarianism comes with two major advantages. The first is that it indicates several similarities between sufficientarianism and other views, even views which do not draw on thresholds at all, which do not become clear if sufficientarianism is defined in terms of the traditional sufficientarian theses. This allows for a much clearer grasp of what is distinctive about sufficientarianism, and, importantly, of what is *not* distinctive about that view.

This relates to the second major advantage of my account. Many objections to sufficientarianism somehow claim that sufficientarianism fetishizes thresholds. However, I will argue that such fetishism arises because of the priority claim and that, crucially, many non-sufficientarian views endorse this claim too. This makes such views equally vulnerable to such fetishism objections. And by examining how those views endorse the

[38] This characterization of sufficientarianism relies on a rather technical analysis of thresholds, which includes, among other things, the idea that thresholds demarcate different ranges of levels (e.g. a range indicating 'enough' and a range indicating 'not enough') on a continuum of possible levels of some metric of justice (e.g. possible welfare levels). We can define the three claims of sufficientarianism with this in mind. The *priority claim* says that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits in certain ranges over benefits in other ranges. The *continuum claim* says that at least two of those ranges are on one continuum. And the *deficiency claim* says that the lower a range is on a continuum, the more priority it has. This more precise definition is crucial for the argument. But in a nutshell, I argue that sufficientarianism holds that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits below some threshold over benefits above that threshold.

priority claim yet avoid worries about fetishism, we can recast sufficientarianism in a different light and strengthen it against objections to its sufficiency threshold.

The final three papers focus on limitarianism. Limitarianism claims that there are good political and/or ethical reasons for preventing people from accumulating more than a certain amount of wealth.[39] Such reasons could include that such wealth has no moral value for the holder or that allowing people to have such wealth has less moral value than redistributing it. However, because limitarianism is a novel view, its status as a principle in the contemporary debate about distributive justice is still uncertain. Moreover, the relationship between the values that limitarianism aims to promote and the exact limitarian thresholds is undertheorized in the literature.[40] And there are some often-heard objections to wealth limits, such as that they are unnecessary and that they lead to economic collapse, that require discussion.[41]

In Chapter 4, titled 'Limitarianism: Pattern, Principle, or Presumption?', I examine precisely what kind of principle of distributive justice limitarianism is and how it can be most plausibly defended. Robeyns situates the view in the landscape of distributive theories by saying that it is 'non-ideal' in the sense that it takes the current distribution of wealth as

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[39] I focus on *economic* limitarianism and therefore on limits to wealth specifically. Yet limitarianism more generally could be applied to any desirable scarce goods, including wealth and income but also, for example, the use of greenhouse gas emissions or procreative freedoms.

[40] Robeyns devotes much of her defence of limitarianism to specifying the level of the threshold by laying out a conception of flourishing upon which it is grounded. But the question of how that specific threshold relates to the value of political equality and meeting urgent needs remains undertheorized. See Robeyns 2017a, 14–30.

[41] E.g. Atkinson 2015, 210; Scanlon 2018, 114; Fleurbaey 2018, 40.

its starting point and 'instrumental' in the sense that it does not say that people should not exceed the limitarian wealth limit as a matter of ultimate moral principle.[42] However, many questions about its status as a distributive principle have so far remained unanswered. This is not only a problem for philosophers, including myself, who are interested in mapping out the landscape of theories of distributive justice. It is also a problem for those defending and criticizing limitarianism, because distinct types of arguments apply to distinct kinds of views.

Therefore, by drawing on the recent literature on distributive justice, I defend two types of limitarian principles of justice. *Limitarian midlevel principles* draw on wealth limits to specify normative commitments for guiding institutional design and individual actions. Such midlevel principles are formulated and defended in such a way that they can be endorsed from the perspectives of a wide variety of different distributive theories, such as egalitarianism, prioritarianism, and sufficientarianism. The *limitarian presumption* draws on wealth limits to specify what a just allocation of wealth requires in the absence of substantive grounds to favour specific wealth distributions. As an illustration, suppose wealth should be distributed based on how many hours someone works. Substantive principles will tell us how to distribute wealth if Jane works ten hours a day and John works two hours a day. Alternatively, presumptions tell us how to distribute that wealth if we do not know how many hours Jane and John work. I will argue that, in cases where such crucial information is missing, we have presumptive reasons to prevent people from having more than a threshold level of wealth.

In Chapter 5, titled 'How Much Is Too Much? Political Equality, Urgent Needs, and the Fully Flourishing Life', I focus on Robeyns' specific defence of limitarianism. As mentioned previously, Robeyns argues that

[42] See Robeyns 2017a, 1–3.

people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life. The central question in this paper is why, if our concern is with political equality and meeting urgent needs, people should not exceed that flourishing threshold. This is not self-evident, since political equality seems to require wealth to be equalized rather than capped, and meeting urgent needs requires a distribution that is tailored towards those who have unmet urgent needs rather than one that limits how much wealth the rich can have.

There are three debates about limitarianism for which this question of how the limitarian wealth limit is determined is pivotal. The first is the debate about what the most plausible articulation of Robeyns' *flourishing limitarianism* is. Robeyns argues that once people can live a fully flourishing life, more wealth lacks moral value for them. However, I will argue that limitarianism is more plausibly defended by rejecting that strong claim. Instead, limitarians should say that above some wealth limit, more wealth has less moral value for the holder than it could have if it were redistributed. The second debate for which the question of how the limitarian wealth limit is determined is pivotal is about whether limitarians should be *flourishing* limitarians. This is certainly not evident, and the way I defend limitarianism as a midlevel principle and presumption does not assume such a notion of flourishing. And the third debate for which this issue is relevant concerns whether wealth limits promote political equality and meeting urgent needs – that is, this is the question about whether limitarianism should be defended at all.

In short, I argue that limitarians should not make the implausibly strong claim that a wealth limit is necessary or sufficient to promote the values that limitarianism seeks to promote. What they must show is that it is likely that those values will be promoted by the wealth limit and that such wealth limits are politically feasible; in other words, the prospects for limitarianism depend on both its political feasibility and its likelihood

of promoting the relevant values. Yet I will also argue that there may be a tension between those two grounds for limitarianism, which limitarians should simply embrace as part of their view. Such limitarianism must then be compared to non-limitarian proposals that are politically feasible and likely to promote the relevant values.

In Chapter 6, titled 'Defending the Democratic Argument for Limitarianism: A Reply to Volacu and Dumitru', I defend limitarianism against two important objections. Robeyns argues that limitarianism is called for given the influence that current income and wealth inequalities have on democracy and the value of political equality. This democratic argument is criticized by Alexandru Volacu and Adelin Costin Dumitru, who argue that limitarianism is both *inefficient* and *ineffective* in securing political equality. In the final paper in this thesis, I show that in response to such objections, limitarians can support a variety of different policies and actions based on their commitment to wealth limits. This includes, among other things, maximum wealth limits as well as inheritance taxes aimed at dispersing wealth.

In Chapter 7, I restate the main claims of this thesis and highlights three contributions of this research project to current philosophical debates that go beyond the arguments in this thesis. The first concerns the focus of philosophical debates about distributive patterns. Instead of viewing egalitarianism, prioritarianism, and sufficientarianism as distinctive distributive patterns, I will argue that it is more fruitful for future theorizing to think of them as distinctive specifications of a single conceptual structure. Moreover, I will argue that the analysis of thresholds in distributive justice is a powerful tool in theorizing about how different distributive concerns can be endorsed within one specific pattern. And finally, I will argue that the reasons for providing a unified account of thresholds in *distributive justice*, such as that it helps understand and clarify the role that thresholds play in views which draw on thresholds,

similarly hold for such a unifying account in other debates in normative philosophy. Hence, this thesis could be a starting point for thinking about a unifying theory of thresholds in normative philosophy broadly conceived.

1.4 The scope of this thesis

Let me, in closing, say something about the scope of this thesis. It is situated in political philosophy, and in the debate about distributive justice in particular. Within that specific area of research, the main contribution of this thesis is to the debates about the pattern of distributive justice. But that specific element of theories of distributive justice does not cover the entire debate about distributive justice. Theories of justice must take a stance on a variety of different issues as well.

To give some examples, theories of distributive theories must specify what exactly should be distributed, such as welfare, primary goods, capabilities, care, work, or something else.[43] They must also specify who should receive whatever is distributed, such as individuals, groups, or non-human animals.[44] Moreover, they must specify who is responsible for ensuring a just distribution, such as the state, the family, individuals, or business corporations.[45] And they must specify where just distributions should be realized, such as on the domestic level, globally, or even across generations.[46]

Each of these issues merits much more discussion than I can offer here. In this thesis, I will only endorse particular answers to these

[43] Cf. Sen 1980; Dworkin 1981a; G. A. Cohen 1989; Arneson 1990; Gheaus 2009; 2016; Robeyns 2017b.

[44] Cf. Singer 2002; Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011.

[45] Cf. G. A. Cohen 1997; Scheffler 2006.

[46] Cf. Rawls 1999; Blake 2001; Sangiovanni 2007.

questions if necessary. Much of what I will say about thresholds and threshold views can be applied to all kinds of different uses of thresholds in distributive justice. This ranges from thresholds denoting points of satiation of core values or normative principles to thresholds denoting the point at which people's nutrition intake is enough to stay alive. Much of what I will say, then, holds independent of how those questions are resolved.

However, two assumptions about distributive justice are important here. The first assumption concerns the question of the distribution of what exactly justice is concerned with. This is known as the *currency* or *metric* of distributive justice. I will argue that people can have too much wealth if they have more than a certain amount of it. Hence, I assume that the distribution of money matters, and I believe that any plausible conception of distributive justice should have something to say about how it should be distributed. I believe this to be a plausible assumption because the distribution of money is likely to influence the distribution of whatever justice is ultimately concerned with.

The second assumption concerns the question of whether justice is concerned with distributive patterns at all. Robert Nozick famously argued against patterned conceptions of distributive justice.[47] He argued that liberty upsets patterns and that if we are concerned with people's freedom then we should not focus on distributions as such but on whether those distributions are realized via fair transactions among free and equal people. And criticism of the focus on distributive patterns has also been raised by others, such as relational egalitarians.[48] They argue that distributive patterns play at most a secondary role in specifying what justice requires because in the end it is not the distribution that matters but some other

[47] Cf. Nozick 1974, 160–64.

[48] E.g. Anderson 1999.

justice-relevant goal. This criticism applies to this thesis because it concerns the development and specification of specific patterns, such as sufficientarian and limitarian patterns, that draw on thresholds.

In this thesis, I will simply assume that there is a place for distributive patterns in specifying how scarce resources or products should be allocated and made available to everyone. However, for at least some of what I will argue in this thesis, that assumption may already be unnecessary. That is because this thesis focuses on *thresholds*, and many libertarians, relational egalitarians, and other critics of patterned theories of distributive justice endorse thresholds as well, such as a poverty threshold or social minimum.[49] Most proponents of those views, then, hold that people should be able to meet their basic needs, and that commitment assumes that there is a threshold. Therefore, I will argue that even critics of distributive *patterns* stand to gain from an examination of and reflection on distributive *thresholds*. For example, I believe that any plausible conception of what justice requires must take issue with the fact that someone can be worth over $200 billion while hundreds of million people live in extreme poverty. That is, I believe that any plausible conception of justice, patterned or non-patterned, must take issue with excess if there is deficiency.

[49] For relational egalitarianism, see Anderson 1999, 318–19; 2008, 265–66. For libertarianism, see Hayek 2001, 124–25; Freiman 2012; Wendt 2019.

2 Thresholds in Distributive Justice*

Abstract. Despite the prominence of thresholds in theories of distributive justice, there is no general account of what sort of role is played by the idea of a threshold within such theories. This has allowed an ongoing lack of clarity and misunderstanding around views that employ thresholds. In this paper, I develop an account of the concept of thresholds in distributive justice. I highlight three contributions that this particular account of thresholds makes: it clarifies the nature of the shift that occurs at the threshold; it resolves a common misunderstanding about headcount principles; and it shows how the arbitrariness objection can be met.

2.1 Introduction

Many theories of distributive justice deploy thresholds. Some of these theories say that people should have *enough* of certain goods – enough to be free from deprivation, for example, or enough to achieve some higher standard of living.[50] Other theories say that people should not have *too much* of certain goods, such as income and capital.[51] As I write this, for example, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos is worth $192 billion. Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of people are living in extreme poverty. Threshold concepts such as deficiency and excess can help explain and evaluate what is wrong with this situation and how we should act in light of it.

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[50] E.g. Rawls 1999; Temkin 2000; Nussbaum 2006.

[51] E.g. Robeyns 2017a; Zwarthoed 2018; Neuhäuser 2018.

Despite the prominence of thresholds in distributive justice, there is no general account of 'thresholds' as such.[52] My aim in this paper is to propose a precise and comprehensive account of distributive thresholds and to offer the conceptual vocabulary to aid ongoing debates about views that deploy them. Such an account provides important insights into current debates on distributive justice. It clarifies ongoing misunderstandings around views that deploy thresholds and guards threshold views against common objections.

To illustrate, one common classification of theories of distributive justice distinguishes between egalitarianism, prioritarianism, and sufficientarianism, and renders sufficientarianism in particular to be a threshold view. Yet this neglects the fact that most specifications of egalitarianism and prioritarianism also rely on thresholds, for example because they support some sort of social minimum.[53] Furthermore, the lack of a unifying formal account of thresholds obscures what renders a threshold distinct from other sorts of devices such as weightings or deontic constraints. This has given rise to widespread misunderstandings of principles that are often associated with thresholds, such as the role that lexical priority and headcounting should play in threshold views.[54] Subsequently, without a

[52] Thresholds are certainly widely discussed, most prominently in the literature on sufficientarianism. But those debates revolve around the question of which substantive commitments proponents of threshold views, and of sufficientarianism in particular, must endorse. They do not concern the more general issue of what sort of role thresholds play in distributive justice. The debate about whether sufficientarians should endorse the 'negative thesis', which says that justice is indifferent to what happens above the threshold, is an example of this. See Casal 2007; Shields 2012; Axelsen and Nielsen 2017; Nielsen 2017; Huseby 2020.

[53] E.g. Temkin 2000; Brown 2005; M. O'Neill 2008. See also §2.2.

[54] See §2.5.

clear understanding of thresholds, prominent but defeasible objections to thresholds, such as the objection that thresholds are arbitrary, resurface everywhere that thresholds are deployed.[55] In light of all this, it is crucial to have a comprehensive account of thresholds to help us better understand some of the key issues in current debates about thresholds in distributive justice.

This paper is structured as follows. In §2.2, I introduce threshold views in distributive justice. In §2.3, I distinguish between three elements of the concept of a threshold, namely the level of the threshold (§2.3.1), what constitutes the value of the threshold (§2.3.2), and how benefits above and below the threshold must be allocated (§2.3.3). In the subsequent sections, I highlight three contributions of this account of thresholds: it clarifies the nature of the shift that occurs at the threshold (§2.4); it resolves a common misunderstanding about headcount principles and shows why, contrary to a received wisdom about such principles, sufficientarians should endorse headcounting (§2.5); and it shows how the arbitrariness objection can be met (§2.6). In §2.7, I conclude by setting out the implications for threshold views in distributive justice.

2.2 Threshold views in distributive justice

Theories of distributive justice specify what a just allocation of distributable goods, such as welfare, resources, or capabilities, requires.[56] Such theories are threshold views if they posit a threshold in specifying this. Thresholds are crucial for understanding many debates in distributive justice, ranging from those about abstract distributive patterns to those about

[55] See §2.6.

[56] Where I am agnostic between different metrics (or 'currencies') of distributive justice, I will use the term 'distributable good' or 'good'. This generic term is intended to capture all possible metrics and proxies for that metric.

applied debates in the contexts of healthcare, education, and climate ethics.[57]

Stuart White gives an insightful example of a claim that illustrates the pervasiveness of thresholds in distributive justice: "People should not be allowed to starve in the streets."[58] This claim suggests that people should have access to at least some minimum standard of living, which means that some threshold should be met. This commitment to a threshold is part of influential specifications of egalitarianism, prioritarianism, utilitarianism, libertarianism, and relational egalitarianism, among other views.[59] Conversely, some philosophers defend thresholds that signal excess rather than deficiency. According to Ingrid Robeyns, for example, the fact that many people are deprived of basic needs supports *limitarianism*, which is the view that people should not have more than a certain amount of wealth.[60] Other examples of distributive limits are limits on the usage of ecological resources.[61] For example, Breena Holland argues in favour of 'capability ceilings'[62] which limit the amount of resources that can be used to secure and promote capabilities and functionings.

[57] For example, see Shue 1993; Powers and Faden 2006; Fabre 2006; Anderson 2007.

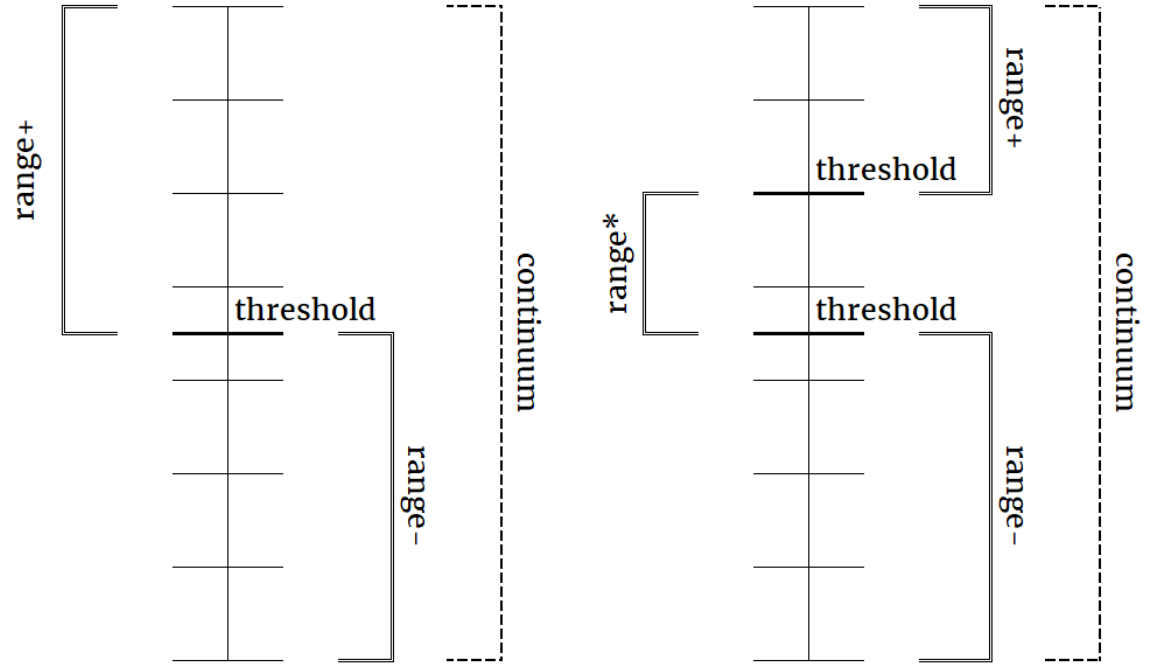
[58] S. White 2015.

[59] E.g. Brown 2005; Goodin 1995; Anderson 1999; Rawls 2001, 131; Scanlon 2003; M. O'Neill 2008, 121; Segall 2010; Freiman 2012; Wendt 2019.

[60] Cf. Robeyns 2017a; 2019.

[61] For ecological limits, see Green Forthcoming.

[62] Cf. Holland 2008.



A. Single-threshold view B. Multi-threshold view (vertical)

Figure 1. The structure of threshold views in distributive justice

Hence, if all theories of distributive justice that deploy thresholds are threshold views, this label applies to many distributive theories. To facilitate the discussion about the conceptual structure of such views, some terminology is needed (see Figure 1A). Threshold views say that there is a *continuum* of levels of a distributable good. Each specific *level* on that continuum signals how much someone has of that distributable good. What characterizes threshold views is that they define a *threshold* on such a continuum, which can be defined in absolute or relative terms.[63] This threshold demarcates two *ranges* of levels. The first range contains the level of the threshold itself and all levels above the threshold (see range+). The second range contains all levels below the threshold (see range-).

[63] See §2.3.1.

Threshold views can deploy a single threshold or multiple thresholds.[64] Threshold views with multiple thresholds can be *vertical* or *horizontal*.[65] Vertical threshold views define three or more ranges on one continuum by positing two or more thresholds. To illustrate, the threshold view in Figure 1B demarcates three ranges, namely range+, which is above both thresholds, range*, which is between the thresholds, and range-, which is below both thresholds.[66] Alternatively, horizontal threshold views specify a threshold for different distributable goods, essentially combining different continua and positing one or more thresholds in two or more of those continua. However, though multi-threshold views certainly merit discussion, I focus here on single-threshold views. The difference between them is that multi-threshold views posit more thresholds, and, consequently, more ranges. But everything there is to say about thresholds in multi-threshold views can be said be exploring thresholds in single-threshold views.[67]

With the idea of a 'threshold', a 'continuum', and a 'range' in mind, we can define threshold views in two different ways (see Figure 2).

> The threshold definition of threshold views: a threshold view defines a threshold on a continuum of some distributable good.

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[64] Multi-threshold views are increasingly prominent in distributive justice, especially in sufficientarianism. For vertical threshold views, see Sales-Heredia 2003; Benbaji 2005; 2006; Huseby 2010; 2017; 2020; Ram-Tiktin 2017; Schuessler 2019. For horizontal threshold views, see Nussbaum 2000a; Axelsen and Nielsen 2015.

[65] Cf. Axelsen and Nielsen 2015, 413–14.

[66] For example, see Benbaji 2005; 2006; Huseby 2010; 2020; for an example in applied ethics, see Gustavsson and Juth 2019.

[67] One exception to this is that multi-threshold views allow for more types of clashes between allocative principles. See §2.3.3.3. and fn. 75.

> The range definition of threshold views: a threshold view defines different ranges on a continuum of some distributable good.

The threshold definition of threshold views and the range definition of threshold views are logically equivalent. If a view defines a threshold on a continuum, then it defines different ranges on that continuum. And conversely, if it defines different ranges on a continuum, then it defines a threshold on that continuum. What distinguishes the two definitions is which analytical commitment they foreground; a commitment to a *threshold* or a commitment to *ranges*.

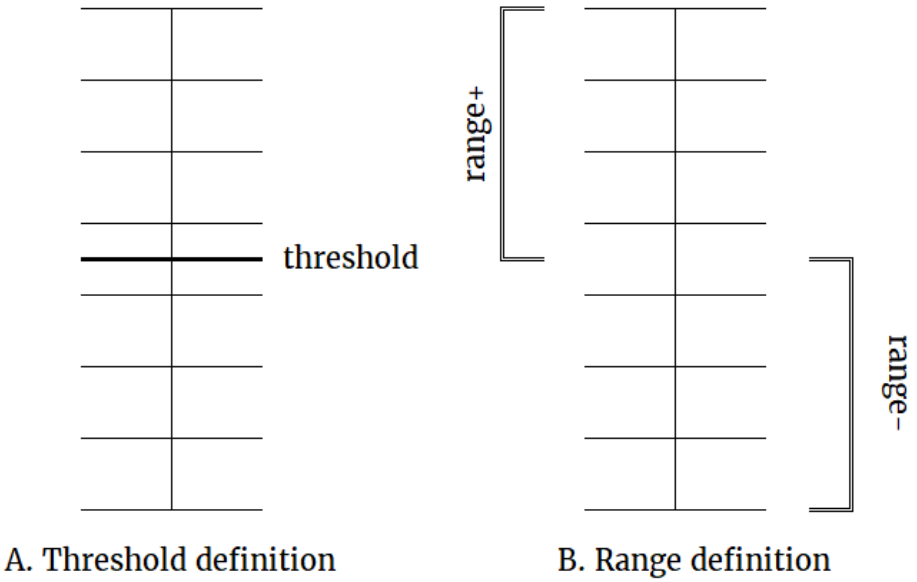

Figure 2. Two definitions of threshold views

In §2.6, I will argue that recognizing the difference between these two definitions of threshold views strengthens the case against the arbitrariness objection. But the two definitions are also insightful in that they tell us something about the scope of distributive theories that qualify as threshold views. Some theories of distributive justice propose an explicit threshold and are most intuitively categorized under the threshold definition of threshold views. For example, sufficientarianism holds that it is important that people secure a threshold level of some distributable

good(s).[68] Alternatively, limitarianism holds that people have too much if they exceed some wealth threshold.[69] It is difficult to characterize these views without mentioning the threshold explicitly. In sufficientarianism, the threshold signals the level of goods people should have, and in limitarianism it signals the level of goods people should not exceed. Views which express their most central commitments in terms of 'having enough' and 'having too much', then, are therefore most naturally categorized under the threshold definition of threshold views.

Other distributive theories endorse thresholds without explicitly positing a threshold and may be more naturally categorized under the range definition of threshold views. Consider the widely shared endorsement of humanitarian reasons to benefit people. Martin O'Neill argues that egalitarians can base their motivation for being concerned about equality on the premise that inequality may prevent people from satisfying their basic needs. But even if this type of egalitarianism does not define an exact threshold at which basic needs are met, it does rely on the idea that there is a range on the continuum in which people do not have enough.[70] O'Neill goes on to suggest that the value of such poverty alleviation "counts in favor of distributive equality" *not* because the underlying beliefs are "distinctively egalitarian" but because of "underlying reasons which are themselves simply humanitarian".[71] But this simply means that egalitarians too care about people having enough of some distributable goods. And the same is true for all other theories of distributive justice which defend such a basic needs threshold or social minimum, even if they do not specify a particular threshold.

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[68] Cf. Casal 2007.

[69] Cf. Robeyns 2017a, 2; Zwarthoed 2018.

[70] Cf. M. O'Neill 2008, 121; see also Rawls 2001, 131; Scanlon 2003.

[71] M. O'Neill 2008, 26–27.

Hence, a theory of distributive justice is a threshold view if it posits a threshold demarcating different ranges on a continuum of some distributable good. I do not distinguish between threshold views that explicitly rely on a threshold and threshold views which do not. The conceptual structure I have outlined here applies to all views which deploy thresholds. The relative weight proponents of these specific distributive theories give to the threshold is a different matter.

2.3 The concept of a threshold

With the analysis of the structure of threshold views in mind, we can now take a closer look at the thresholds such views deploy. Threshold views posit a threshold to specify what a just allocation of distributable goods requires. The concept of such a threshold comprises three elements. These elements are (i) the level of the threshold, (ii) what constitutes the value of the threshold, and (iii) how benefits between and within ranges must be allocated. Few threshold views specify each of these elements in detail. But a fully fleshed out distributive theory that draws on thresholds should specify each of them, or at least offer guidance on how they should be specified. I will discuss the different elements of the concept of a threshold in turn.

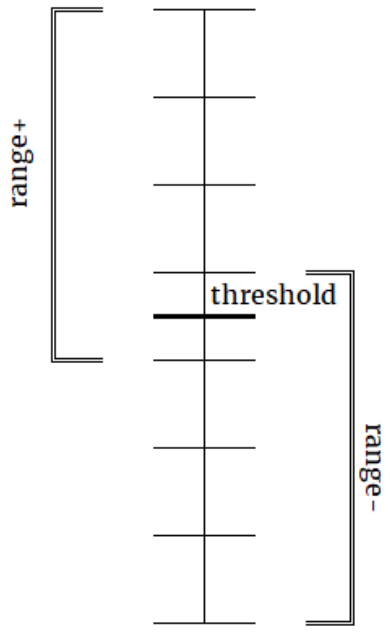
2.3.1 The level of the threshold

The first element of the concept of a threshold is its level. We can set the level of the threshold by specifying its exact level or by positioning specific levels on the continuum in specific ranges.

The level of the threshold shows which range each level on the continuum belongs in. Sometimes, knowing that specific levels are in specific ranges tells us everything we need to know about the level of the threshold. For instance, without agreeing on an exact poverty line, we may reach a consensus on some levels being clear cases of deprivation. Here it is not a problem if the exact level of the threshold is unclear. But we may

disagree about whether higher levels still count as cases of deprivation, which makes the issue of the exact level of the threshold more important.

This relates to a broader point about the 'exactness' of the threshold. Some threshold views allow room for uncertainty about its exact level. A threshold view could say that the border between range+ and range- is not clearly demarcated, such that for some levels it is unclear exactly which range they are in (see Figure 3A). We need additional principles to decide how levels within the overlapping range should be treated. For instance, perhaps they should be treated as though they are in the range below the threshold. Or perhaps the burden of proof is with those who regard them as being above the threshold. Alternatively, decision-makers may have to exercise their discretionary power regarding levels in the overlapping range.



A. A vague threshold

Figure 3. The level of the threshold

Aside from defining precise or vague thresholds, we can identify at least two ways of setting the level of threshold. An *absolute threshold* says that the level of the threshold does not change depending on how much others have. Alternatively, a *relative threshold* is determined in relation to the actual allocation of the distributable good. Consider the poverty threshold as

an example, which is arguably the most widely accepted threshold in theories of distributive justice. According to absolute poverty thresholds, the poverty threshold can be set without reference to the allocation of distributable goods. An example of such a threshold is a threshold signalling necessary nutrition intake for subsistence, which is set with reference to the calories necessary for a person to stay alive but has no relation to how much others have (if my nutrition intake is too low to stay alive, this is true irrespective of your nutrition intake).[72] Alternatively, relative poverty thresholds specify the poverty threshold by referring to how much other people have. For example, a relative poverty threshold could say that everyone in the lowest income percentile counts as being poor. Or the threshold can be set with reference to the average or median level of some distributable good, the minimum income, or some other standard.

The level of the threshold is intertwined with other elements of threshold views as theories of distributive justice. In particular, it can only be set with reference to the metric of justice, such as welfare, resources, or capabilities. The metric of justice specifies what the continuum is a continuum *of* (e.g. levels of welfare). In doing so, it determines what people have enough of when they reach the threshold (e.g. enough welfare), or what they have too much of when they exceed the threshold (e.g. too much welfare).

2.3.2 The value of the threshold

The second element of the concept of a threshold is what constitutes the value of the threshold, which can be *intrinsic* and/or *instrumental*. If the value of reaching some threshold cannot be solely derived from some other value(s), reaching that threshold has intrinsic value. However, if the

[72] Cf. Naiken 2003.

value of reaching that threshold can be derived from some other value(s), reaching that threshold has instrumental value.

To illustrate, someone who defends a basic needs threshold as an efficient way of promoting social stability or security need not believe that it is particularly valuable for people to meet their basic needs. Instead, they believe that allowing people to do so is valuable because it promotes those other moral concerns. Others, however, may attach intrinsic value to such a threshold, for example because it indicates that people who can satisfy their basic needs can live a minimally decent life. Moreover, thresholds can have both instrumental value and intrinsic value. For instance, a basic needs threshold can be valuable both because it is good to be able to meet one's basic needs and because allowing people to meet their basic needs promotes some other moral concern(s).

2.3.3 The allocative principles

The allocative principles are the third element of the concept of a threshold; they specify how benefits and losses ('benefits' for short) within and between ranges must be allocated. Consider the following distributions, assuming the level of the threshold is 10.

	Kourtney	Kim	Khloé	Rob
A	9	9	50	500
B	1	10	15	15

Suppose we must choose between *A* or *B*; which should we choose? Threshold views specify three types of allocative principles that should be used to answer this question. First, *(non-)headcount principles* specify how benefits must be allocated between ranges. Second, *range principles* specify how benefits must be allocated within ranges. Third, *priority rules* specify how benefits must be allocated if there is a clash between (non-)headcount principles and range principles. I will discuss these allocative principles in turn.

2.3.3.1 Headcount principles versus non-headcount principles

The first type of allocative principle specifies how to allocate benefits between different ranges. A *headcount principle* says that we must maximize the number of people above or below the threshold.[73] Such a principle could prefer *B*, in which only Kourtney is below the threshold, over *A*, because in *A* both Kourtney and Kim are below the threshold. Headcount principles are plausible principles in specific cases. If, for example, no one below the threshold will survive some grave injury, then it may be better to perform as many life-saving operations as possible – meaning that it would be better to apply a headcount principle. A headcount principle, then, prioritizes benefitting people just because that pulls them over the threshold, but it may withhold benefits altogether from people further below the threshold if the benefit they could receive would not be enough to get them up to the threshold.

However, many people reject headcount principles. It seems unjust to maximize the number of people above or below the threshold instead of ensuring, say, that people get as close to the threshold as possible. For example, Kourtney, who is the worst off in both distributions, is much worse off in *B* than in *A*, yet headcount principles would prefer *B* over *A* nonetheless.[74] Alternatively, then, threshold views can endorse a *non-headcount principle,* which says that we need not maximize the number of people above or below the threshold. If that is the case, the number of people on a specific side of the threshold is of limited importance compared with something like the degree to which people fall below the threshold.

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[73] For discussion, see Arneson 2000a, 56–57; Casal 2007, 315–16; Segall 2010, 40.
[74] On the assumption that the number of people above rather than below the threshold should be maximized.

Hence, most threshold views reject headcount principles and endorse non-headcount principles instead. However, in §2.5 I will argue that this rejection of headcount principles is too quick. Many critics of headcount principles, and all those who self-identify as sufficientarians in particular, should endorse such principles. But first we must turn to the other types of allocative principles.

2.3.3.2 Range principles

Range principles specify how distributable goods in a specific range must be allocated. Such range principles can be any of the common distributive patterns (except patterns that include a threshold). Range principles can be egalitarian, prioritarian, utilitarian, libertarian, or maximin, or specify some other patterned or non-patterned principle of distributive justice.

To illustrate, consider the following distributions, assuming the threshold is set at 10.

	Kourtney	Kim	Khloé	Rob
A	9	9	50	500
C	4	8	14	50

An egalitarian range principle above the threshold would prefer *C* over *A* because *C* has a more equal distribution above the threshold than *A*. And a deficiency-minimizing range principle below the threshold would prefer *A* over *C* because in *A* the total deficiency from the threshold is lowest (2 in *A* versus 8 in *C*). And there are more, almost endless, variations of possible range principles above and below the threshold.

2.3.3.3 Priority rules

Priority rules are allocative principles which offer guidance in cases where headcount principles and range principles rank distributions differently. This can be because (i) a headcount principle conflicts with one or more

range principles or because (ii) different range principles conflict with each other.[75]

Recall the following distributions, assuming the level of the threshold is 10.

	Kourtney	Kim	Khloé	Rob
A	9	9	50	500
B	1	10	15	15
C	4	8	14	50

Let me give two examples of conflicting allocative principles. First, consider a threshold view which posits a headcount principle that has no preference between *A* and *C*. Let us assume that this view specifies an egalitarian range principle above the threshold and a similar egalitarian principle below the threshold. Consequently, for the range below the threshold, this view prefers *A* over *C* because *A* is more equal below the threshold. But for the range above the threshold, it prefers *C* over *A* because *C* is more equal above the threshold. Here, a priority rule must settle which range principle should have priority. Second, consider a threshold view which prefers *B* over the other distributions because in *B* most people are above the threshold. But suppose that view defends a range principle below the

[75] Moreover, if the threshold view is a multi-threshold view, this can also be the case because a headcount principle conflicts with another headcount principle, or because different range principles and different headcount principles are in conflict with each other. For example, the first headcount principle could say that we must maximize the number of people above the first threshold, and the second headcount principle could say that we must maximize the number of people above the second threshold. But this leads to conflicts if one distribution maximizes the number of people above the first threshold but not the above second threshold and if the second distribution maximizes the number of people above the second threshold but not above the first threshold.

threshold which prefers *C* and *A* over *B*, because in *B* Kourtney is worst off. Hence, such a view ranks *B* highest on the basis of its headcount principle, but it ranks *B* lowest on the basis of its range principle below the threshold. In this case, then, a priority rule must establish whether the headcount principle or range principle has priority.

There are two types of priority rules that can be used to settle such conflicts: lexical priority rules and weighted priority rules. A *lexical priority rule* gives absolute priority to one allocative principle over other principles. To illustrate, if a headcount principle has lexical priority over the range principle below the threshold, which, in turn, has lexical priority over the range principle above the threshold, then the theory ranks distributions by looking first at what the headcount principle prefers, and between distributions that are equal in that regard it gives priority to distributions preferred by the first range principle and then to distributions preferred by the second range principle.

Alternatively, a *weighted priority rule* states that allocative principles must be weighed against each other. There are many possible variations that can be made when assigning relative weight to each of the principles. To give one example, a threshold view could give weighted priority to a prioritarian distribution below the threshold, which gives it reason to prefer *A* over *C*. Yet it could also hold that the inequality above the threshold in *A* is so great that this justifies preferring *C* over *A*, all things considered. Hence, a weighted priority rule says that we have justice-relevant reasons to prefer certain distributions over others and that we must weigh those different reasons and their respective rankings to come to an all-things-considered ranking as far as the allocative principles are concerned.

2.4 What happens at the threshold?

Threshold views define a threshold as demarcating ranges on a continuum of some distributable good. I have argued that the concept of a threshold

that such views draw on has three elements, namely a level, a value, and allocative principles, i.e. (non-)headcount principles, range principles, and priority rules. In the following sections, I highlight three insights that this analysis of thresholds and threshold views provides, that is, insights into what happens at the threshold, into headcount principles, and into the arbitrariness objection.

The first insight concerns what it is exactly that a threshold *denotes*. One common and insightful way of specifying the role that thresholds play in distributive justice is to say that they denote a 'shift' or 'discontinuity in the weight of our reasons'. This idea is developed by Liam Shields in his analysis of sufficientarianism.[76] The analysis of thresholds in this paper can deepen our understanding of what such shifts or discontinuities amount to. Aside from the fact that Shields' analysis focusses on sufficientarianism whereas my account is broader and applies to all threshold views in distributive justice, I will argue that my analysis provides two further benefits. First, it gives a more accurate and comprehensive description of the kinds of shifts that can occur at the threshold. Second, it can more easily further debates on thresholds in non-sufficiency views.

Shields argues that a threshold demarcates a "shift in our reasons to benefit people once they have secured enough".[77] More precisely, Shields defines the shift thesis as follows:

> The shift thesis: once people have secured enough there is a discontinuity in the rate of change of the marginal weight of our reasons to benefit them further.[78]

[76] Cf. Shields 2012; 2016; 2017.

[77] Shields 2012, 102.

[78] Shields 2012, 108.

According to Shields, this shift or discontinuity can be explained by one of two things.[79] First, it could result from a justice-relevant satiable reason. If a particular reason(s) for benefitting someone is sated once they secure a certain amount of goods, then once they reach that level our reasons for benefitting them change. For example, if we benefit Kourtney to lift her from poverty, then once she is no longer living in poverty, *that* reason for benefitting her is sated. We may still have reasons to benefit Kourtney, but those reasons cannot include the reason that she must be free from poverty. Second, the shift could result from a change in the relative weight of our reasons to benefit someone. Suppose we have two reasons to benefit someone, but the first reason has increasingly less weight the more goods they have and the second reason has the same weight no matter how many goods they have. If this is the case, the more goods someone has, the weightier the second reason becomes compared with the first reason, up to the point where the second reason has more weight than the first reason. The point at which the weight of these two reasons is the same is the point at which a shift in our reasons to benefit people occurs, and therefore that is where the threshold is.

The idea of a shift or discontinuity is helpful for understanding and specifying the role that thresholds play in distributive justice, but to fully achieve this, we must qualify Shields' analysis in light of my conceptual analysis. The first reason for having to do this is straightforward: Shields is interested in *sufficientarianism* and the issue of what sufficientarians should believe, whereas I am interested in the structure of threshold views in distributive justice more generally.[80] Shields therefore excludes

[79] Cf. Shields 2017, 212.

[80] For example, Shields argues that the shift thesis should replace the more common 'negative thesis' as a prerequisite for a sufficientarian view. See Shields 2012.

instrumental thresholds from his analysis, because he argues that sufficientarians should defend intrinsic thresholds.[81] Furthermore, the shift thesis is phrased to capture thresholds which signal sufficiency and not, for example, excess.[82] This is because it says that the discontinuity applies "once people have secured enough".[83] These differences set the analysis in this paper apart from Shields' analysis in the sense that my analysis is broader and aims to capture a wider range of views.

Yet the main contribution of the account provided in this paper is not that it applies more broadly than Shields' account but that it can deepen our understanding of the possible shifts and discontinuities that may occur at the threshold. Consider again Shields' claim that the threshold signals a discontinuity in the weight of our reasons to benefit someone, which occurs either because a reason is sated or because of some significant change in the relative weight of a reason to benefit someone once they reach the threshold. However, such discontinuity could equally well be explained by one single reason, and it need not change the relative weight of our reason to benefit someone. For example, suppose our reason for benefitting people is that we endorse a principle of equal opportunity. This, it seems to me, implies that we must be concerned with *both* sufficiency and equality, and it is not evident that either of them matters more from the standpoint of justice. If people have less than a threshold level of

[81] Cf. Shields 2012, 112–13. Some might think that instrumental thresholds are only trivial thresholds in the sense that they are only a means to promote some end rather than being intrinsically valuable. However, the structure of threshold views does not depend on whether or not the threshold is intrinsically valuable, and so there is no need to limit the scope of this analysis to either intrinsic or non-instrumental thresholds. I thank an anonymous reviewer of *Utilitas* for this point.

[82] Cf. Shields 2012, 112–13.

[83] Shields 2012, 108.

goods (e.g. if they live in extreme poverty), equal opportunity cannot be secured because people lack the resources to pursue opportunities in the first place.[84] But likewise, equality of opportunity can only be secured if the allocation of distributable goods among those above the threshold is sufficiently equal. This is because a vastly unequal distribution means that those who have the most goods have objectionably more opportunities than others. Consequently, equality of opportunity requires that people have enough goods to pursue opportunities but also that they have sufficiently equal amounts of goods when they are above the threshold. Hence, there need not be a change in reasons to benefit someone for there to be a discontinuity in how benefits should be allocated. In this case, for example, both above and below the threshold our reason for benefitting people is the principle of equal opportunity.

What this suggests is that aside from focussing on the *types of reasons* that justify a shift once people reach some threshold, we should also explore the *types of shifts* that thresholds can denote. One possible shift is a shift in the range principle according to which benefits must be allocated. A different range principle applies below the threshold than above the threshold. Even if both range principles are egalitarian, for example, the people among whom an egalitarian distribution must be achieved is different below and above the threshold. Another possible shift is a shift in the relative weight of a benefit above or below the threshold. A threshold view that is concerned with people having enough of some distributable good attaches more relative weight to the optimal distribution below the threshold than to the optimal distribution above the threshold. And conversely, a threshold view that is concerned with people not having an

[84] Of course, according to a very minimal account of equality of opportunity, a world in which no one has opportunities satisfies this moral ideal. Here, however, I assume a more demanding conception of equality of opportunity.

excess of some good attaches more relative weight to an optimal distribution above the threshold, such as by limiting the number of people above the threshold or by limiting the total amount of goods above the threshold.

More generally, then, if the concept of a threshold comprises a level, value, and allocative principles, all possible shifts can be characterized as a combination of specifications of each of those elements. This does not tell us *why* a shift should occur, but it does give us the conceptual machinery to characterize each possible shift.

Let me illustrate the value of this approach with an example that starts from a debate that is internal to one specific threshold view, namely sufficientarianism, but is insightful in many other contexts. Sufficientarianism is traditionally defined as combining the *positive thesis* that it is intrinsically valuable to have enough and the *negative thesis* that once people have enough, no further distributive criteria apply.[85] The negative thesis, then, posits a specific type of shift which combines a range principle above the threshold that is indifferent about possible distributions with a priority rule that specifies giving lexical priority to subthreshold benefits.[86] But these priority rules and range principles can be different, resulting in different shifts that the threshold gives rise to.

To give another example, Campbell Brown argues in favour of 'threshold prioritarianism', which holds that we must give priority to benefitting those below some threshold and that once we cannot benefit them any further, we must turn to others and benefit them, giving priority to those who are worse off.[87] Hence, this type of prioritarianism combines a prioritarian range principle above some threshold and a similar range principle below that threshold, and gives lexical priority to benefits below

[85] Cf. Casal 2007.

[86] See also Huseby 2020.

[87] Cf. Brown 2005; 2007.

that threshold. The benefit of this distributive view over standard prioritarianism is that it does not entail that any loss to a worse-off person, no matter how large, could be outweighed by benefits to a group of better-off people, no matter how small, if the number of the better-off persons is large enough. However, Matthew D. Adler and Nils Holtug reject threshold prioritarianism and adopt standard prioritarianism instead because they consider it "counterintuitive that morality includes a threshold across which absolute priority obtains".[88] Although this indeed targets the structure of Brown's proposal, we can now see that it could easily be amended to strike a balance between both Brown's reason for proposing a threshold and Adler and Holtug's reason for rejecting it. For example, instead of threshold prioritarianism giving lexical priority to subthreshold benefits, it could give weighted priority to subthreshold benefits. Or instead of giving lexical priority to subthreshold benefits, it could deploy some sort of headcount principle.

Hence, the nature of the shift that occurs at the threshold can be characterized by saying that it specifies the different elements of the concept of a threshold. This account supplements Shields' analysis of thresholds by being more comprehensive and precise in its specification of possible shifts that might occur at the threshold and by being capable of applying to all kinds of threshold views, including non-sufficientarian ones.

2.5 What's wrong with headcounting?

The second insight that the analysis of thresholds provides is that we must reconsider a received wisdom about – or, according to most philosophers of distributive justice, *against* – headcount principles. This received wisdom, which is that headcount principles must be rejected, is especially clear in the literature on sufficientarianism, but others may reject such

[88] Adler and Holtug 2019, 132.

principles on similar grounds.[89] I will argue that this rejection relies on a misunderstanding of the role that headcount principles play in threshold views. In fact, showing why this is a misunderstanding suggests that sufficientarians and other proponents of intrinsic thresholds should *endorse* headcount principles and that, at least in my view, proponents of headcount principles have not defended such principles in the strongest possible way.

Shields' discussion of headcount principles illustrates the received wisdom about such principles and the reasoning behind their assumed implausibility. He argues that sufficiency principles which deploy headcount principles, i.e. 'headcount sufficiency', "assess distributions solely in terms of the number of people who have secured enough in each distribution".[90] Shields gives the following counterexample against headcount sufficiency:

> [C]onsider a threshold of 100 units, where 100 units represents being very well-off and 1 unit represents being extremely badly off. A version of headcount sufficientarianism will hold that we should benefit the person with 99 units by 1 unit at the expense of benefiting the person with 1 unit by 98 units, but this seems to be the wrong answer. In this case it seems that we should benefit the very badly off person by 98 units.[91]

Put differently, headcount sufficiency prefers distribution *D* over *E* where the threshold is set at 100:

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[89] E.g. Roemer 2004, 278–79; Wolff and De-Shalit 2007, 91–93; Segall 2013, 137, fn. 10.

[90] Shields 2012, 103.

[91] Shields 2012, 103.

	Kendall	Kylie
D	100	1
E	99	99

Preferring *D* over *E* seems unjust unless the threshold is very low (see §2.3.3.1). If the threshold signals the point above which people are 'very well-off', this is not the case. Therefore, we must reject headcount sufficiency.

Shields and other critics of headcounting can hardly be blamed for this interpretation of headcount principles.[92] Proponents of headcounting have stated their views in exactly those words, which, in my view, has led them to significantly undersell the value of headcounting in distributive justice. For example, Harry Frankfurt proposes "to distribute the available resources in such a way that as many people as possible have enough or, in other words, to maximize the incidence of sufficiency".[93] And Dale Dorsey 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]".[94] This is precisely what Shields opposes, and though I will argue that Shields' objection does not apply to headcount principles as such, it is certainly a valid objection to these defences of headcounting.

The problem with the common refutation of headcount principles is that it relies on a misunderstanding about the role headcount principles play in threshold views. Likewise, proponents of these principles have also failed to take into account possible and, arguably, more plausible variations of headcounting in threshold views. The received wisdom is right

[92] I thank an anonymous reviewer of *Utilitas* for this point.

[93] Frankfurt 1987, 31.

[94] Dorsey 2008, 437.

about one thing: headcount principles say that we must maximize the number of people above or below the threshold. However, that does not mean, as Shields puts it, and as Frankfurt and Dale suggest, that headcount sufficiency needs to assess "distributions *solely* in terms of the number of people who have secured enough in each distribution".[95] This disregards the distinction between headcount principles as a type of allocative principle and headcount principles that are combined with a lexical priority rule. Put differently, it confuses headcount principles as a type of allocative principle with headcount principles *that have lexical priority over other allocative principles*.

Headcount principles rank distributions based on the number of people above or below the threshold. But they do not say what the relative importance of this ranking is compared with rankings proposed by other allocative principles. Hence, headcount principles give a reason in favour of specific distributions. But other allocative principles can give reasons in favour of *other* specific distributions. For example, headcount sufficiency can prefer *D* over *E* because in *D* more people are above the threshold. However, its range principle below the threshold could prefer *E* over *D* because *E* benefits the least advantaged. A headcount sufficiency view which combines such a headcount principle and such a range principle, then, includes reasons both in favour of *D* and in favour of *E*. But it need not give priority to headcounting over other distributive concerns. The relative weight that headcount sufficiency attaches to headcounting depends on its priority rules.

Hence, a headcount principle says that we must maximize the number of people above or below the threshold. It does *not* say that maximizing the number of people above or below the threshold has lexical priority over other moral concerns – that would involve a combination of a headcount

[95] Shields 2012, 103. Emphasis mine.

principle and a lexical priority rule. Rather, it says that a distribution that maximizes the number of people above or below the threshold is preferable in at least one regard to a distribution which does not do so. Just as an egalitarian range principle says that an egalitarian distribution is preferable in at least one regard to an inegalitarian distribution.

Consequently, the difference between headcount sufficiency and non-headcount sufficiency is that headcount sufficiency attaches distinctive value to people reaching the threshold whereas non-headcount sufficiency does not.[96] Headcount sufficiency says that because it is only in *D* that Kendall has 'enough', *D* is preferable to *E* in at least one way. Conversely, non-headcount sufficiency rejects that *D* is in any distinctive way preferable to *E* because it is only in *D* that Kendall reaches the threshold. Put differently, a non-headcount principle is *indifferent* to the fact that someone reaches the threshold, but headcount principles attach distinct value to people reaching the threshold. Contrary to the received wisdom, then, the role that headcount principles play in threshold views is

[96] Note that the distinction between headcount principles and non-headcount principles is different from that between instrumental thresholds and intrinsic thresholds. Instrumental thresholds can be combined with headcount principles and non-headcount principles. For instance, if the aim is to save as many lives as possible in order to win a war, we have an instrumental reason to apply a headcount principle. However, if the aim is to minimize crime, then we could posit some basic needs threshold which signals the point up to which additional benefits no longer correlate with lower levels of crime. But instead of lifting as many people as possible above that threshold, reducing crime might be better achieved by getting people as close to the threshold as possible. Here the instrumental threshold is combined with a non-headcount principle. Hence, the distinction between headcount principles and non-headcount principles is not the same as the distinction between instrumental thresholds and intrinsic thresholds.

providing a reason in favour of distributions which allow more people to reach the threshold rather than giving lexical priority to maximizing the number of people on a specific side of the threshold.

This brings us to why sufficientarians should defend headcount principles. Sufficientarians hold that reaching the threshold is intrinsically valuable, meaning, for example, that it is intrinsically valuable not to live in deprivation, live a minimally decent life, or achieve some other threshold level of a distributable good.[97] These things are intrinsically valuable because the value of having enough in this sense cannot be, or cannot entirely be, derived from some other value(s). But if it is intrinsically valuable to have enough, then there should be a distinctive value in someone having enough. For that reason, sufficientarians and others who defend intrinsic thresholds should defend a headcount principle. For sufficientarians, *D* is preferable to *E* in at least one way because in *D* Kendall has enough, and it is intrinsically valuable to have enough. Whatever reason sufficientarians have for favouring *E* over *D* – and, certainly, they may have very good reasons to rank *E* higher than *D*, all things considered – that reason cannot be that it does not matter if Kendall reaches the threshold.

A different way of putting this point is by describing what sufficientarians *lose* by rejecting headcount principles. If they reject those principles, they can still say that it is intrinsically valuable that people reach the threshold. However, they must deny that distributions in which some people reach the threshold are preferable to distributions in which no one reaches the threshold in at least one specific sense. That, to me, seems

[97] E.g. Shields 2012.

implausible; if it is intrinsically valuable to have enough, then it is valuable if people reach the threshold.[98]

Let me illustrate the type of sufficientarianism I have in mind here with two examples. The first is a version of headcount sufficientarianism that gives weighted but not lexical priority to headcounting. Consider the following three distributions, assuming that the threshold is set at 10:

	Kendall	Kylie
F	9	8
G	10	7
H	10	1

Many distributive views prefer *F* to *G* and *H*, for example because *F* is more equal and because it maximizes the benefits to the worst off. However, sufficientarians can prefer *G* to *F* because in *G* Kendall reaches the threshold, and the value of someone reaching the threshold outweighs the loss to Kylie *in this specific case*. But those sufficientarians could still prefer *F* to *H*, because even though Kendall reaches the threshold in *H* too, the value of her reaching the threshold is not enough to outweigh Kylie's loss *in that specific case*.

The second example is a headcount sufficiency view that gives lexical priority to the range principle below the threshold. Such a view says that we must first rank distributions on the basis of the range principle below the threshold, and among distributions that are equal in that respect, the distribution in which most people are above the threshold is

[98] Some proponents of headcounting might say that giving headcount principles lexical priority is attractive because it gives the greatest priority to those who are desperate. That is compatible with my analysis, as its main contribution is to show that headcount principles may but need not have lexical priority, whereas the common interpretation in the literature assumes that headcounting has lexical priority.

preferable. Both types of headcount sufficientarianism illustrate the kind of sufficientarianism I am advocating here. And if my argument is correct, sufficientarians and other proponents of intrinsic thresholds should defend a version of this view as well.

A critic could say that this defence of headcount principles does not solve the problem raised by Shields.[99] The defence still says that justice requires benefitting the better-off below the threshold by tiny amounts instead of the worse-off by much larger amounts, if that allows the better-off to exceed the threshold. Giving weighted priority rather than lexical priority to this principle only means that it applies *in one respect* rather than *all things considered*. So one might say that instead of solving the problem, this response only limits its objectionable implications.

However, the fact that a principle is implausible as an all-things-considered principle need not render it implausible as a pro tanto principle. Proponents of headcount principles can respond to Shields' objection by saying that it does not apply *less* to headcount principles that have weighted priority but that it does not apply to them at all. They can grant that giving headcount principles lexical priority is objectionable without agreeing that this shows something about the nature of headcount principles. So if Shields says that headcount sufficientarianism seems to give the "wrong answer" if it says that we should "benefit the person with 99 units by 1 unit at the expense of benefiting the person with 1 unit by 98 units",[100] then this wrong answer does *not* result from headcounting as such but from failing to see the proper place for headcounting in threshold views. Furthermore, I have argued that sufficientarians should endorse headcount principles because they defend an intrinsic threshold. Consequently, if headcount principles should be rejected even if they apply only

[99] I thank an anonymous reviewer of *Utilitas* for raising this objection.

[100] Shields 2012, 103.

in one respect, then this challenges sufficientarianism in general, because all these views endorse intrinsic thresholds, not just sufficientarian views which give lexical priority to headcounting.

Hence, the received wisdom that headcount principles must be rejected rests on a misunderstanding. It mistakenly assumes that headcount principles must have lexical priority. But instead of saying that headcount principles claim that we should always maximize the number of people who secure enough, we should say that they attach distinct value people securing enough. This is precisely the kind of thing that sufficientarians must say if they defend an intrinsic thresholds. Therefore, sufficientarians should endorse headcount principles.

2.6 The arbitrariness objection

The third insight that the analysis of thresholds provides concerns the most common objection to threshold views: the *arbitrariness objection*. This objection says that no particular level on the continuum can be pointed out as the level of the threshold, and this is worth reflecting on here. Proponents of threshold views sometimes say that establishing a threshold non-arbitrarily is not much of a challenge, or that it is not necessary to have a clear answer to the arbitrariness objection.[101] Yet the arbitrariness objection is so pervasive in discussions on threshold views in distributive justice that we cannot consider the role thresholds play in such theories without considering their alleged arbitrariness.[102] At the very least,

[101] For example, see Shields 2017, 219. Note, however, that Shields says that the arbitrariness need not be answered in the context in which it is raised against his view. Yet threshold views more generally cannot say this, as they may be developed in contexts where the level of the threshold cannot be established by sufficientarian reasons (see also §2.4).

[102] See, for example, Goodin 1987, 49; Arneson 2000a, 56; Casal 2007, 312–14; Dorsey 2014, 50; Wolff and De-Shalit 2007, 92.

proponents of threshold views must acknowledge that *others* reject thresholds on the basis of their supposed arbitrariness. Furthermore, the analysis of threshold views suggests novel directions in which threshold views can be developed that become apparent in light of the arbitrariness objection.

The most straightforward response to the arbitrariness objection is that sometimes we simply know how high the threshold should be. For instance, suppose that justice is concerned with being well nourished. If so, as long as Kris has *enough* food, it does not matter if she has just enough or much more than that. Kris may have reasons other than 'being well nourished' to want to have more food, but if that is the only *justice-relevant reason*, those other reasons do not constitute demands of justice. This answers the arbitrariness objection. Lacking sufficient food means that one does not meet the threshold, having enough food is enough to meet the threshold, and having more than that is more than enough to meet the threshold. Hence, the threshold should be set at the point where people have enough to be well nourished, and once they have enough there is no longer a justice-relevant reason to benefit them further in this regard. Sometimes, then, we can specify a threshold non-arbitrarily.

However, drawing on the analysis of thresholds set out earlier, we can give another response to the arbitrariness objection. That some thresholds are arbitrary may be beside the point. For instance, even if the exact level of the threshold is disputed, there can be an agreement on the fact that certain levels are in a specific range. Sometimes all a threshold view needs to do is to say for a specific level in which range it is. But surgical precision need not be necessary for this. When the Boxing Day tsunami hit Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand on December 26, 2004, for example, there was little doubt that many people were deprived of access to basic justice-relevant goods such as food, housing, and healthcare. Regarding any reasonable basic needs threshold, then, it was evident that

many people were deprived of their basic needs. And there was no need for a very precise threshold to show this. In some cases, the fact that some people are below the threshold is beyond reasonable doubt even if there is reasonable disagreement about the exact level of the threshold.

The more general point here is that the arbitrariness objection reduces the plausibility of threshold views in distributive justice to whether they can set the level of the threshold. But it is crucial to appreciate the fact that talking about thresholds implies talking about ranges; and that, conversely, talking about ranges implies talking about thresholds. So as well as showing that thresholds need not be arbitrary, or that arbitrariness is not always a problem, we can also argue that we have good reasons to distinguish different *ranges*. If we have good reasons to distinguish ranges, then, by definition, we have good reasons to endorse thresholds.

Moreover, we *do* have good reasons to distinguish between different ranges. Such ranges can correspond with notions of deficiency and excess, and are broadly supported and appeal to widely shared intuitions about social policy in distributive issues. The notion of deficiency is particularly widespread, and it rests on the idea that some people have too little when they are below some adequate standard. Recall that, as White observes, the statement that people should not be allowed to starve in the streets or that they should not be denied access to a decent minimum level of healthcare are widespread political views.[103] Many institutions of the welfare state aim to help people secure a level of basic goods such as food, access to healthcare and education, and housing. To the extent that such positions are defended by theories of distributive justice, those theories assume a commitment to different ranges, and, consequently, to thresholds.

[103] Cf. S. White 2015.

2.7 Concluding remarks

Threshold views are theories of distributive justice which draw on thresholds to specify how distributable goods should be allocated. Such views are prominent in various areas of distributive justice, ranging from abstract distributive patterns such as sufficientarianism and limitarianism to applied issues in the contexts of healthcare, education, and climate ethics. I have distinguished between three elements of the concept of a threshold that such views deploy, which are as follows:

(i) the level of the threshold, which
    a. determines the exact level of the threshold; and/or
    b. positions specific levels in specific ranges; and
(ii) what constitutes the value of the threshold, which can be
    a. intrinsic value; and/or
    b. instrumental value; and
(iii) the allocative principles, which are
    a. a headcount principle and/or a non-headcount principle; and
    b. range principles; and
    c. a priority rule.

Any complete specification of a threshold view in distributive justice must be defined in terms of these different elements. In this paper I have not argued in favour of specific threshold views but have merely aimed to show what unites the more specific conceptualizations of such views. Furthermore, I have highlighted three ways in which this conceptual analysis benefits the current debate on threshold views in distributive justice. It shows the distributive implications of the *shift* that occurs once people reach the threshold; it shows that common objections to headcount principles must be reconsidered and that sufficientarians must endorse

headcounting; and it shows how proponents of threshold views can deal with the arbitrariness objection.

3 Justice, Thresholds, and the Three Claims of Sufficientarianism*

Abstract. In this article, I propose a novel characterization of sufficientarianism. I argue that sufficientarianism combines three claims: a priority claim that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits in certain ranges over benefits in other ranges; a continuum claim that at least two of those ranges are on one continuum; and a deficiency claim that the lower a range on a continuum, the more priority benefits in that range have. This characterization of sufficientarianism sheds new light on two long-standing philosophical debates, namely about the distinctiveness of sufficientarianism as a distributive principle and about the common objections to sufficientarianism.

3.1 Introduction

According to sufficientarianism, justice requires that everyone has enough.[104] 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

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[104] See Frankfurt 1987; Casal 2007; Shields 2012.

with sufficient levels of healthcare, education, safety, and other goods.[105] And yet sufficientarianism has been subjected to sustained criticism.[106] 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 the view must be characterized.[107] 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*

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[105] For egalitarianism and sufficiency thresholds, see Waldron 1986; Nagel 1991; Rawls 2001; Temkin 2003b; M. 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 N. Barry 2006; Segall 2010. For relational egalitarianism and sufficiency thresholds, see Anderson 1999, 318–19; 2008, 265–66. For libertarianism and sufficiency thresholds, see Hayek 2001, 124–25; 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; Powers and Faden 2006; Fabre 2006; Alvarez 2007; Ram-Tiktin 2012. On sufficiency thresholds in education, see J. White 1994; 2016; Gutmann 2001; Curren 1995; Satz 2007; Anderson 2007; Cudd 2015; Shields 2015; Tooley 2017. On sufficiency thresholds in climate ethics and intergenerational justice, see Shue 1993; Rawls 2001, 159–60; Page 2007; Rendall 2011.

[106] I elaborate on those objections in §3.4.

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

thesis, which states that once they have enough, there is a shift in our reasons for benefiting them further.[108] 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: (i) a *priority claim* that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits in certain ranges over benefits in other ranges; (ii) a *continuum claim* that at least two of those ranges are on one continuum; and (iii) 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,

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

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 §3.2, I argue that sufficientarianism combines the continuum claim, the priority claim, and the deficiency claim. In §3.3, I discuss three objections to this characterization. In §3.4, I introduce five common objections to sufficientarianism. I then defend sufficientarianism in the subsequent sections: §3.5 deals with objections concerning indifference, absolutism, and responsibility, §3.6 with the no-threshold objection, and §3.7 with the arbitrariness objection. In §3.8, I conclude by setting out the implications for sufficientarian theories of distributive justice.

3.2 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",[109] and that "if everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether some had more than others".[110] 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').[111] 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.[112] This implies that there is a threshold demarcating two ranges of amounts of money on a single continuum of possible amounts of money.[113] 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 content. The fact that those ranges are on one continuum gives us the first claim that sufficientarians must endorse:

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[109] Frankfurt 1987, 37.

[110] Frankfurt 1987, 21.

[111] E.g. Casal 2007, 298–99.

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

[113] I 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.

> *The continuum claim*. At least two of the ranges that are relevant from the standpoint of justice are on one continuum.[114]

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*.[115] 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.

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[114] The 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 first two points in §3.3. Third, some sufficientarians argue that there are more than two ranges on one continuum, e.g. Benbaji 2005; 2006; Huseby 2010; 2020.

[115] On instrumental and non-instrumental sufficiency thresholds, see Shields 2012, 106.

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.[116] 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 benefits or the number of beneficiaries.[117] 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

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[116] The 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. In §2.5, 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. I thank an anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Political Philosophy* for urging me to clarify this point.

[117] Dale Dorsey (2008, 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, 31; Roemer 2004, 273–74; 278–79; Page 2007, 11.

or choice. Or such deficiencies must be eliminated unless doing so has significant levelling-down consequences above the threshold.[118]

The priority claim is not unique to sufficientarianism either. Consider John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness. Rawls states that social primary goods must be distributed equally, unless an unequal distribution is to everyone's advantage.[119] 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.[120] 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

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[118] For example, Christopher Freiman (2012, 37) suggests that "sufficiently large gains in other values can outweigh gains in sufficiency (which receives extra weight)".

[119] See Rawls 1999, 54. Rawls does defend some thresholds, but I will leave that aside for now. See Rawls 2001, 130–31.

[120] More 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.

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.

The deficiency claim says that the range that should have priority is the range *below* the threshold.[121] This sets sufficientarianism apart from views which say that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits in the range *above* some threshold.[122] It is certainly true that some

[121] I 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 for example Benbaji 2005; 2006; Huseby 2010; 2019; 2020.

[122] Though 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.

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.

3.3 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.[123] 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).[124] 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.[125] 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

[123] I thank an anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Political Philosophy* for raising these objections.

[124] See Casal 2007, 298–99; Shields 2012, 105–7.

[125] See Casal 2007, 299–303; Shields 2012, 102–5.

shift in our reasons for benefiting them further.[126] 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.[127] 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, 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

[126] See Shields 2012, 108–11; 115–16.

[127] E.g. Axelsen and Nielsen 2015, 407–8; Nielsen 2017.

"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".[128] 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.

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[128] Temkin 2003b, 65.

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 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.[129] 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".[130] 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.

[129] See Nussbaum 2013; Axelsen and Nielsen 2015.

[130] Nussbaum 2013, 33.

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".[131] However, incommensurability does not violate the priority claim. Consider the following example.[132] 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. Rather, what incommensurability entails is that we cannot specify priority rules that guide conflicts between different continua. To deal with such conflicts,

[131] Nussbaum 2006, 167.

[132] I thank an anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Political Philosophy* for suggesting this example.

then, Nussbaum must endorse additional claims to the three sufficientarian claims, but she does not reject those claims.[133]

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.

3.4 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

[133] Nussbaum (2000b, 1024–25) suggests that if capabilities conflict, a cost–benefit analysis might be necessary even though it would not fully capture the incommensurability of those capabilities.

social policy and institutional design. I will introduce the objections, and then discuss them in detail in subsequent sections.

3.4.1 The indifference objection

The indifference objection holds that sufficientarianism is objectionably indifferent to inequalities above the threshold.[134] 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.[135]

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.

3.4.2 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).[136] Shlomi Segall puts the point as

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[134] E.g. Arneson 2000b, 347; 2002, 181–84; 189; Temkin 2003a, 769–71; 2003b, 65–66; Casal 2007, 307–8; 311–12; 315–16; Brighouse and Swift 2009, 125–26; Holtug 2007, 149–50; 2010, 231–35.

[135] Casal 2007, 307.

[136] E.g. Roemer 2004, 278–79; Arneson 2000a, 56–57; 2002, 188–89; 2006, 26–33; Casal 2007, 315–16; Holtug 2007, 151–54; Wolff and De-Shalit 2007, 91–93; Segall 2010, 40; Dorsey 2014, 50; 53; Knight 2015, 123–24.

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".[137] Hence, sufficientarianism favours threshold-crossing benefits over all other benefits – and such fetishism, critics argue, is objectionable.

3.4.3 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.[138] 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.[139] 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.

3.4.4 The no-threshold objection

The no-threshold objection holds that the threshold which sufficientarianism posits does not exist.[140] For example, Casal asserts that "it is strange

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[137] Segall 2013, 137, fn 10.

[138] E.g. Arneson 2000b, 347–48; 2002, 191–93; Temkin 2003a, 769–72; Segall 2010, 40–41; Knight 2015, 122–23.

[139] Cf. Temkin 2003a, 772.

[140] E.g. Arneson 2000a, 56; 2002, 194; Casal 2007, 317; Holtug 2010, 207; 227–31; Dorsey 2014, 50; 53.

to think that [having reached the threshold] individuals can suddenly plummet from having absolute priority to no priority whatsoever".[141] 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."[142] 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.

3.4.5 The arbitrariness objection

The arbitrariness objection holds that sufficientarianism proposes thresholds that are arbitrary and not established by good reasons.[143] To illustrate, Arthur Ripstein argues that resources needed for 'meaningful agency' must be distributed according to some sufficiency ideal.[144] 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."[145] Generalizing from this, many metrics of justice, such as well-being 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.

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[141] Casal 2007, 317.

[142] Arneson 2006, 30.

[143] E.g. Goodin 1987, 49; Arneson 2000a, 56; 2002, 185; 189–91; 2006, 26–32; 2010, 32–33; Casal 2007, 312–14; Hooker 2008, 181–91; Dorsey 2014, 50; Wolff and De-Shalit 2007, 92.

[144] See Ripstein 1999, chap. 9.

[145] Arneson 2002, 91.

It may seem that the no-threshold objection and the arbitrariness objection are two sides of the same coin.[146] 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.

3.5 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 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.[147] As a range principle, the negative thesis states that justice specifies no further

[146] I thank an anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Political Philosophy* for raising this objection.

[147] See also Huseby 2020, §2.

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 subthreshold 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'.[148] Furthermore, Philipp Kanschik weakens the pull of the indifference objection by arguing that indifference is compatible with progressive taxation.[149] 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.[150] 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.[151] 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

[148] See Axelsen and Nielsen 2015.

[149] See Kanschik 2015.

[150] See Huseby 2010; 2020.

[151] See Herlitz 2019, 4–9.

thesis, which entails that justice does specify distributive criteria above the threshold and that benefits below the threshold need not have lexical priority.[152] Similarly, Yitzhak Benbaji rejects lexical priority and instead gives non-lexical priority to benefits depending on the range they are in.[153] And Christopher Freiman defends a libertarian view which endorses a commitment to sufficientarianism without committing itself to the negative thesis.[154]

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.[155] 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 subthreshold benefits.

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

[153] See Benbaji 2005; 2006.

[154] See Freiman 2012.

[155] See Macfarlane 2018.

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 §3.6. 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.[156] Moreover, critics of Rawls have applied versions of the responsibility objection to his view as well. For example, Rawls' insensitivity to responsibility has been criticized extensively by G.A. Cohen, Ronald Dworkin, and Richard Arneson.[157] 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.

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

[156] Most famously by H.L.A. Hart (1983).

[157] See Dworkin 1981b; 2000; Arneson 1989; 2008; G. A. Cohen 1989.

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.

3.6 Plummeting, shifting, and the no-threshold objection

The no-threshold objection problematizes sufficientarianism because of the "plummeting"[158] and "large shift in what we morally ought to do"[159] 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.[160] 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 (§3.6.1). Subsequently, it shows that sufficientarianism can learn from other views that

[158] Casal 2007, 317.

[159] Arneson 2006, 30.

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

endorse the priority claim that thresholds need not exist for them to play a role in conceptualizing justice (§3.6.2). 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 §3.7.

3.6.1 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.

Recall Rawls' 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.[161] 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

[161] On irreducible social goods, see Taylor 1995; MacIntyre 1998; Murphy 2005.

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.[162] 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 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

[162] See Moss 2014, 79–84.

Rawlsians in particular have given to the objection and will recast sufficientarianism along similar lines.

3.6.2 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".[163] We can distil two types of sufficientarianism from this.[164] 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

[163] Frankfurt 1987, 37.

[164] This distinction draws on Joshua Cohen's distinction between "natural threshold interpretations" and "social equilibrium interpretations" of the social minimum, see J. Cohen 1989, 733–34.

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 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.[165] Another example of such a natural threshold is a calorie-intake threshold in poverty analysis.[166] 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

[165] To give another example, Brian Barry (1975, 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, 134.

[166] See Naiken 2003.

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 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 for such conceptions. Whether thresholds must specify lexical or non-lexical priority rules, include a concern for responsibility, or be 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.

3.7 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.[167] 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.

[167] For discussion, see, for example, Huseby 2010, 180–82; Axelsen and Nielsen 2017, 102–6; Shields 2017, 218–20.

The second response is that the arbitrariness objection falls prey to the *continuum fallacy*.[168] 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'[169] or what it takes to be able to participate in a democratic society.[170] 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.[171] However, the very idea of a threshold puts pressure on this assumption because it indicates a shortfall from something satiable.[172] According to some sufficientarians, the

[168] See also Reader 2006, 348–49; Nielsen 2019a, 23–24. I thank an anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Political Philosophy* for suggesting this response to the arbitrariness objection.

[169] See, for example, Gough 2019.

[170] See Anderson 2007; Satz 2007.

[171] See Nielsen 2019b, 809-814. On satiable principles, see Raz 1986, 235–36.

[172] I thank an anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Political Philosophy* for pointing out this distinction.

principles underlying the threshold are satiable.[173] Others claim that the *values* or *metrics* of the threshold are satiable.[174] 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.[175] 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.[176] 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

[173] E.g. Frankfurt 1987; Crisp 2003; Shields 2012.

[174] E.g. Axelsen and Nielsen 2015; Nielsen 2019b.

[175] See also Page 2007, 16–17.

[176] E.g. Reader 2006, 348–49; Robeyns 2017a, 24-25; Claassen 2018, 114–17.

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.[177] Of course, critics 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.

3.8 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.

[177] On precautionary reasoning, see Beyleveld and Pattinson 2000.

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.

4 Limitarianism: Pattern, Principle, or Presumption?*

Abstract. In this article, I defend two types of principles of justice which draw on wealth limits. First, limitarian midlevel principles specify wealth limits as normative commitments for guiding institutional design and individual actions. Second, the limitarian presumption draws on wealth limits to specify what a just allocation of wealth requires under epistemic constraints. Such a presumption says that without substantive reasons to the contrary, we should regard a distribution as unjust if some people's wealth exceeds the limitarian threshold. I argue against a possible but implausible interpretation of limitarianism as an ideal distributive pattern.

4.1 Introduction

In this article, I assess the prospects for the limitarian thesis that there is some wealth threshold, the 'limitarian threshold', such that someone has too much wealth if they exceed that threshold.[178] Drawing on recent literature on distributive justice, I defend two types of limitarian principles of

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[178] On limitarianism, see Robeyns 2017a; 2019; Zwarthoed 2018; Volacu and Dumitru 2019; Harel Ben Shahar Mimeo; cf. Neuhäuser 2018. I use the term 'wealth' to refer to the bundle of economic resources an individual possesses. I will focus on economic limitarianism. However, limitarianism is also applicable to other valuable goods, such as emissions or natural resources.

justice.[179] First, limitarian *midlevel principles* draw on the limitarian thesis to specify normative commitments for guiding institutional design and individual actions. Second, the limitarian *presumption* draws on that thesis to specify what a just allocation of wealth requires under epistemic constraints. I will argue in favour of both limitarian midlevel principles and the limitarian presumption.

This article is structured as follows. After introducing limitarianism and the arguments supporting it (§4.2), I will first argue that we must reject a possible but implausible interpretation of limitarianism as an ideal distributive pattern (§4.3). I then argue in favour of two types of nonideal limitarianism, namely limitarian midlevel principles (§4.4) and the limitarian presumption (§4.5). I end by reflecting on the role of limitarianism in distributive justice (§4.6).

4.2 Limitarianism and surplus wealth

Ingrid Robeyns recently coined the term *limitarianism* and argued that it has a place in thinking about the demands of distributive justice.[180] She defines the view as follows:

> Limitarianism advocates that it is not morally permissible to have more resources than are needed to fully flourish in life. Limitarianism views having riches or wealth to be the state in which one has more resources than are needed and claims that, in such a case, one has too much, morally speaking.[181]

[179] There may, of course, be other ways to interpret the limitarian thesis, for example as an ethical principle for individual action. However, I will limit myself to limitarianism as a principle of justice.

[180] Cf. Robeyns 2017a; 2019.

[181] Robeyns 2017a, 1.

At the heart of this defence of limitarianism lies what we may call the *flourishing claim*. This is the claim that above some wealth threshold having more wealth does not contribute to one's flourishing and therefore has 'zero moral weight'[182]. We have reasons to redistribute such 'surplus wealth' if that promotes some morally valuable aim(s), such as political equality or eradicating poverty.

Yet limitarianism need not commit itself to this flourishing threshold. The limitarian threshold could also signal, say, sufficiency in some other metric of advantage, or the level of the threshold could be set by investigating when allowing people to accumulate more wealth upsets some important normative concern, such as political equality or equality of opportunity.[183] Therefore, the crucial limitarian claim is that there are good political and/or ethical reasons to prevent people from having more than a certain amount of wealth. In short, limitarianism claims that people should not have surplus wealth.

The claim that people should not have surplus wealth can be justified on at least three different grounds. I will spell them out explicitly because limitarians need not tie their case too closely to one particular reason. And even those who reject one or two reasons for why surplus wealth

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[182] Robeyns 2017a, 12. On the flourishing threshold, see Robeyns 2017a, 14–30.

[183] If so, the limitarian threshold should be set with reference to those specific normative concerns. For instance, to promote political equality limits to wealth should factor in considerations of relative differences. The reason the superrich can undermine democratic procedures is not fully explained by how much wealth they have, but also by how much they have compared to others. Limitarian threshold should take this into account. Furthermore, it may be that distinct arguments for limitarianism suggest different thresholds, which must then be balanced with each other. For a discussion on various ways to set the limitarian threshold, see Harel Ben Shahar (mimeo). I thank an anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* for this point.

should be redistributed might still be drawn to limitarianism because of the other reason, which broadens the scope of limitarian theorizing.

The first reason to redistribute surplus wealth could be that it has zero moral value, which simply means that nothing morally valuable can be gained from having it. On this view, all other things being equal, a world in which some people have surplus wealth is not preferable over a world in which no one has surplus wealth. I take it that this is why Robeyns says that surplus wealth has zero moral weight, for example, when she says that the 'argument for urgent unmet needs [see below, DT] is based on the premise that the value of surplus income is morally insignificant *for the holder* of that income'[184].

The second reason to redistribute surplus wealth could be that it has moral value but that this value is lexically outweighed by some other normative concern(s). This does not deny that something morally valuable can be gained from having surplus wealth, nor that, all else being equal, sometimes people should be allowed to have surplus wealth. But whatever can be gained from having surplus wealth is less valuable, morally speaking, than other normative concerns.

The third reason to redistribute surplus wealth could be that in practice allowing people to have surplus wealth is less important, morally speaking, than other normative concerns; yet, at least in theory, allowing people to have surplus wealth *could* outweigh those concerns. For instance, someone might prefer a distribution in which one person lives in poverty but all others have surplus wealth over a distribution in which everyone lives just above the poverty threshold. This would conflict with the limitarian thesis that someone has too much wealth if they exceed the limitarian threshold. But even if one holds such a view, in the actual world so many people are below the poverty threshold that the reasons for

[184] Robeyns 2017a, 13. Emphasis in original.

allowing people to have surplus wealth are simply outweighed by the reasons for redistributing it.

Robeyns gives three reasons why people should not have surplus wealth.[185] The *democratic argument* states that extreme wealth undermines political equality and fairness in democratic procedures.[186] The *needs argument* states that extreme wealth should be used to meet people's urgent needs, such as by lifting them from poverty or by financing solutions to urgent collective action problems.[187] And according to the *ecological argument*, the wealth of the superrich should be used to finance climate mitigation and adaptation.[188] This article asks the following question: if we are concerned with political equality, meeting urgent needs, and disruptive climate change, does this justify the limitarian thesis in distributive justice that someone has too much wealth if they exceed the limitarian threshold?

Robeyns defends limitarianism in nonideal circumstances, taking the current distribution of wealth as her starting point.[189] However, Robeyns' initial formulation of limitarianism leaves open what kind of principle it is exactly. This calls for further elaboration because, as I will argue below, not all interpretations of limitarianism are equally plausible and each of them has different implications. I distinguish three ways in which limitarianism can be interpreted as a principle of justice: it can be seen as (i) a distributive pattern, (ii) a midlevel principle, or (iii) a presumption. In what follows, I will assess the prospects for limitarianism in

[185] For other arguments for limits to wealth, see Drewnowski 1978; Ramsay 2005; Zwarthoed 2018.

[186] Cf. Robeyns 2017a, 6–10; 2019, 254–56.

[187] Cf. Robeyns 2017a, 10–14; 2019, 257–58.

[188] Cf. Robeyns 2019, 258–60.

[189] Cf. Robeyns 2017a, 2.

distributive justice and argue in favour of limitarian midlevel principles and the limitarian presumption.

4.3 Limitarianism as an ideal distributive pattern

We must first examine a possible but implausible interpretation of limitarianism, which I will refer to as *ideal pattern limitarianism*. Despite this interpretation being implausible and, to the best of my knowledge, not having any defenders, assessing that view serves two purposes: it shows why we must not be tempted to (uncharitably) interpret limitarianism as an ideal distributive pattern, and it will prove valuable later on to show why the objections to such ideal limitarianism do not apply to limitarianism as a nonideal view.[190]

Ideal patterns specify what distribution of valuable goods must be achieved or pursued in a just society. In this debate, the main contenders are egalitarianism, prioritarianism, and sufficientarianism.[191] If limitarianism is interpreted along those lines, it claims that in an ideal world people should not exceed the limitarian threshold. We can interpret such ideal limitarianism as an all-things-considered view according to which it is always unjust if people exceed the limitarian threshold; or as a *pro tanto* view according to which distributions in which some people exceed the limitarian threshold are in at least one respect less just than distributions in which people do not exceed that threshold.

However, we must reject both interpretations of ideal pattern limitarianism. Limitarianism only claims that it is unjust to have surplus wealth *under nonideal conditions*, which includes, for example, the fact that

[190] For example, see §4.5.4.

[191] For egalitarianism, see M. O'Neill 2008; Temkin 2003a. For prioritarianism, see Parfit 1997; Holtug 2007. For sufficientarianism, see Shields 2012; Axelsen and Nielsen 2015.

the current distribution of wealth is vastly unequal, that the superrich have objectionably more political power than others, and that millions of people around the world live in extreme poverty. Limitarianism claims that having surplus wealth only becomes objectionable if we combine the idea of surplus wealth as having zero moral value or less moral value than other moral concerns with the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Yet none of the interpretations of the moral value of surplus wealth by itself imply that people should not have such wealth; and so, in ideal circumstances, people should be allowed to have surplus wealth. This is why we must reject ideal pattern limitarianism. There is nothing unjust about a distribution in which all normative concerns are met and some people exceed the limitarian threshold. Moreover, if surplus wealth has moral value for the holder, they may in fact be morally entitled to surplus wealth provided those normative concerns are met. But limitarian views are nonideal views that only apply under specific conditions. And so, those kinds of possible distributions do not count against limitarianism because in those distributions the conditions under which limitarianism applies do not hold.

Therefore, ideal pattern limitarianism should be rejected. However, that does not mean that we should reject the pursuit of limitarian distributions. I will argue that extreme wealth can only be just if we leave aside important nonideal considerations. Limitarian midlevel principles and limitarian presumptions, which are two different ways to unfold limitarianism in a nonideal form, do take such considerations into account. They both say that in our world and possible worlds similar to it we have good reasons to defend limitarianism despite the fact that, in an ideal world, limitarianism cannot be justified. In what follows, I will discuss those specifications of limitarianism in turn.

4.4 Limitarianism as a midlevel principle

If limitarianism is interpreted as a midlevel principle, it claims the following:[192]

> Limitarian midlevel principle: no one should have wealth that exceeds the limitarian threshold.

Midlevel principles are moral principles that connect 'theory' and 'circumstance'. By *theory,* I mean normative foundations, such as the greatest happiness principle, a conception of autonomy, a notion of moral equality, or some procedural conception of justice. By *circumstance* I mean the specific policies, rules, institutions, and individual actions that characterize the status quo. The reasons adduced in defence of limitarianism, such as the democratic argument, the needs argument, the ecological argument, and the account of flourishing, can be understood as arguing in favour of limitarian midlevel principles in circumstances characterized by wealth inequality, unequal political power, extreme poverty, and disruptive climate change.

Limitarianism can draw support from what Cass Sunstein labels 'incompletely theorized agreement'[193] in which agreement exists on specific propositions or outcomes, but there is no agreement on the general theory that accounts for it. Both sufficientarians and prioritarians, for instance, can agree that justice requires the eradication of poverty and support policies and institutions which aim to do so, including limitarian policies. However, for sufficientarians the ground for such limitarianism is that the

[192] Midlevel principles are increasingly prominent in public policy areas; see, for example Thompson 2002; Lever 2012; Fraser 2012. They also play a crucial role in bioethics Beauchamp and Childress 2001. For further discussion, see Sandin and Peterson 2019.

[193] Cf. Sunstein 1995; see also Bayles 1986, 62; Wolff 2019, 14–15.

poor live below the sufficiency threshold; yet prioritarians supports limitarianism because the poor have weighted priority. Limitarian midlevel principles bypass such foundational disagreement and enable agreement about normative commitments in specific cases.

Midlevel principles specify *pro tanto* commitments that must be carefully balanced in light of other normative commitments and the particulars of specific cases.[194] Such principles must be assessed in light of the ability of the state to administer and enforce the policies, rules, and institutions they promote, their likely incentivizing effects, concerns about efficiency, effectivity, and public support, trade-offs with other midlevel principles, and so forth.[195] To illustrate, Marc Fleurbaey claims that 'imposing a 100 percent marginal tax rate [is] a recipe for economic collapse'.[196] If this is obviously true and clearly so for those theorizing about what justice requires, limitarian midlevel principles are unlikely to be a valuable contribution to thinking about, say, institutional schemes that optimally promote justice in income taxation (assuming that limitarianism indeed proposes a 100 percent marginal tax rate). I do not think this is obviously true at all. But even if limitarian midlevel principles would seriously hamper economic activity, such principles can still serve as a frame to shift the Overton window, and they might still move the superrich to act for limitarian reasons.[197]

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[194] Cf. John 2010, 14.

[195] On limits to wealth and public opinion, see Davis et al. 2020; Robeyns et al. 2021.

[196] Fleurbaey 2018, 40.

[197] Importantly, endorsing midlevel principles in a specific context does not commit one to endorsing them in others too; similarly, rejecting limitarian midlevel principles in one context does not mean that they must be rejected in all others. And we might even endorse limitarian midlevel principles in specific contexts for

However, one might object that defending limitarian midlevel principles only pushes back the problem of justifying limitarianism.[198] There are two types of cases we might imagine when considering the possibility of an incompletely theorized agreement on limitarianism. The first involve proponents of different perspectives who are considering whether to converge upon a single shared conception of limitarianism. Here I have this first type of cases in mind. But another type of cases is relevant as well, namely if proponents of limitarianism disagree about what form the limitarian threshold should take. For instance, some might defend higher thresholds than others, or defend limitarian principles to guide institutions but not individual agents. However, one might question what good it is to converge upon limitarianism as a midlevel principle if there is disagreement as to what form such a principle should take in practice.

In response, note that even if there is disagreement about the exact limitarian threshold, different proponents of limitarian midlevel principles can still agree on procedures to determine that threshold, such as by voting or consulting experts. And they may prefer such a threshold over having no wealth limit at all, even if the threshold they agree upon is different from what they regard as the best threshold. The need for such agreement is simply a feature of the context in which limitarian midlevel principles are deployed. However, and importantly, there may be less disagreement about what form limitarianism should take in some important cases. Let me discuss two such cases, drawing on Robeyns' needs

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a specific purpose but not for others – for example, to motivate the superrich but not to guide institutional design. As an example, someone might think that income earned on the labour market is 'deserved' in the moral sense but that income from inheritance is not, allowing limitarian policies in the context of inheritance taxation but not in the context of income taxation.

[198] I thank an anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* for raising this objection.

argument and ecological argument, to show how limitarian midlevel principles can inform institutional design and individual actions.

The needs argument states that surplus wealth should be used to meet people's urgent needs. This argument is not really controversial. Many people, for example, including egalitarians, prioritarians, and sufficientarians, believe that we have strong normative reasons to eradicate poverty.[199] And following Peter Singer's canonical work on this topic, effective altruists have argued for this claim for a long time.[200] They all agree that those who possess wealth above some high threshold have specific duties to eradicate poverty, even though they disagree about what gives rise to those duties, whether they are ethical and/or moral duties, or whether these duties should be discharged through governmental policies or individual actions. Importantly, it is not because egalitarians, prioritarians, sufficientarians, and others attach value to the limitarian threshold per se that they can agree that those who have wealth that exceeds that threshold have special moral obligations. In the context of poverty alleviation, then, limitarian midlevel principles can inform institutional design and individual actions.

According to the ecological argument, we must use surplus wealth to help address climate mitigation and climate adaptation.[201] First, the rich are responsible for a disproportionate amount of emissions compared to others and therefore have greater individual responsibility to combat dangerous climate change. Second, the industries that have allowed people to accumulate vast amounts of wealth, such as the oil industry, are often carbon intensive. Designing institutions in such a way that the superrich

[199] See, for example Nussbaum 2000c; Blake 2001; Crisp 2003; Miller 2007; Hayek 2011.

[200] Cf. Singer 1972; Singer 2009.

[201] Cf. Robeyns 2019, 258–60.

are responsible for a significant part of the costs of climate mitigation and adaptation can therefore be regarded as compensation for negative externalities. Third, at least some of the wealth of the superrich comes from subsidized industries that are harmful to the environment. Taken together, these three reasons, according to Robeyns, justify limitarianism in this context. And thus, when thinking about policies in the context of climate change, those who agree with these reasons can all adopt a limitarian midlevel principle in that specific context.

Hence, limitarian midlevel principles aim to bridge the gap between theory and circumstance by saying that when theorizing about what justice requires in specific circumstances, there is a *pro tanto* claim that no one should have wealth that exceeds the limitarian threshold. And as such a principle, the limitarian thesis can be defended in distributive justice.

4.5 Limitarianism as a presumption

Limitarians who claim that there is a presumption in favour of limitarianism endorse the following definition:

> Presumptive limitarianism: without substantive reasons to the contrary, we have reasons to regard a distribution as unjust if some people's wealth exceeds the limitarian threshold.

I will argue in favour of such presumptive limitarianism in distributive justice. More precisely, justice requires a limitarian distribution of wealth unless we have substantive grounds to think otherwise. I will give three arguments for this. First, the widely held 'presumption in favour of equality' grounds a derivative 'presumption of limitarianism'.[202] Second, the idea of surplus wealth grounds presumptive limitarianism. And third,

[202] I use 'presumption of limitarianism', 'presumptive limitarianism', and the 'limitarian presumption' interchangeably.

presumptive limitarianism can be derived from moral concerns such as political equality and meeting urgent needs if we factor in epistemic constraints.

Let me first clarify what a 'presumption' entails. A presumption is a risk-averse principles that aims to minimize the possible harm of a decision given the prior beliefs and evidence available to the decision-maker. Presumptions are often mistaken for substantive principles, but it is crucial to recognize the differences between them.[203] Substantive principles, such as ideal distributive patterns, tell us what we must do on the assumption that we know the relevant facts. But presumptions tell us how to act in the absence of knowledge about those facts. We can compare presumptions in distributive justice with the presumption of innocence in legal theory and the precautionary principle in environmental ethics and policy. The presumption of innocence tells us to treat someone as if they are innocent until they are proven guilty. And the precautionary principle tells us how to weigh different options in the absence of decisive evidence about what they will bring about. Similarly, presumptions in distributive justice tell us what distributive justice requires in the absence of substantive grounds to favour specific distributions.

[203] E.g. Westen 1990, 253; Gosepath 2015, 182; Stark 2019. We must also distinguish presumptions from *pro tanto* claims. For example, *pro tanto* pattern limitarianism claims that it is in at least one sense unjust if some people's wealth exceeds the limitarian threshold. However, presumptive limitarianism does not rest on the assumption that people should not be allowed to exceed the limitarian threshold.

4.5.1 Presumptive limitarianism and the presumption of equality

The limitarian presumption can be derived from the egalitarian presumption. Let me illustrate the egalitarian presumption with an example.[204] Suppose Jesse wants to distribute some valuable goods between Adam and Eve depending on who of them writes the longest poem. Unfortunately, however, the poems get lost before Jesse can read them, and there is no way for him to tell whether Adam or Eve drafted the longest poem. Given this uncertainty, Jesse decides to distribute the valuable goods evenly between them. This is not because he believes that they are equally deserving of it – that is, after all, something Jesse cannot know without reading the poems. In fact, he might believe that they are *not* equally deserving. But in the absence of the relevant information, it seems most just for Jesse to *presume* that Adam and Eve are equally deserving. This is the egalitarian presumption in distributive justice.

Now suppose Jesse distributes valuable goods between Adam and Eve according to some substantive moral principle, such as a conception of 'desert' or 'weighted priority'. Again, however, Jesse lacks information about the extent to which Adam and Eve meet that criterion. Now consider the following distributions between Adam and Eve:

	Adam	Eve
Distribution A	2	2
Distribution B	3	1
Distribution C	1	3
Distribution D	4	0
Distribution E	0	4

[204] For a defence and discussion of the presumption of equality, see Räikkä 2019. This example draws on Räikkä 2019, 814–17. Räikkä also discusses some objections to this specific case, for example, that it may be fair for Jesse not to distribute the valuable good at all. I will leave that aside here.

On the assumption that Jesse lacks knowledge about how many goods Adam and Eva are entitled to on substantive grounds, the egalitarian presumption favours distribution *A*. In *A*, Adam and Eve can both at most be overpaid two goods or underpaid two goods. In contrast, in *B* and *C*, they can be overpaid or underpaid up to three goods. And in *D* and *E*, they can be overpaid or underpaid up to four goods. Following the presumption of equality, then, *A* is most risk averse, *B* and *C* are less risk averse than *A* but more risk averse than *D* and *E*, and *D* and *E* are least risk averse (or most risk tolerant). Because of this, it is presumptively just, according to the presumption of equality, to distribute the valuable goods equally between Adam and Eve.

If we now consider the distribution of wealth rather than of generic valuable goods, the presumption of equality holds that people should have equal amounts of wealth unless we have substantive reasons suggesting otherwise. In general, the larger Adam's share of wealth relative to Eve's share, the less just Adam's share is likely to be. This supports presumptive limitarianism by implication. Presumptive limitarianism is likely to reduce or at least constrain objectionable inequality by setting an upper threshold on how much wealth people can have.

The presumption of limitarianism is less demanding than the presumption of equality. This is because presumptive limitarianism specifies a broader range of possible distributions that are equally just. If, for example, the limitarian threshold deems that having four valuable goods or more is unjust, then, unlike the presumption of equality, it is agnostic between distributions *A*, *B*, and *C*. The presumption of equality, then, grounds a derivative presumption of limitarianism. But the relation is not biconditional: one can endorse presumptive limitarianism without endorsing the presumption of equality.

Alternatively, we can also think of presumptive limitarianism as a specification of what the presumption of equality requires. Presumptive

limitarianism specifies what justice requires in the distribution of wealth specifically. But this is compatible with endorsing the presumption of equality as the overarching fundamental normative principle. For example, the presumption of equality might require a distribution of primary goods or capabilities that is equal, which implies, when it comes to wealth specifically, that the distribution of wealth must be limitarian.

Hence, the presumption of limitarianism can be defended as an implication of the presumption of equality in distributive justice and/or as a specification of a more fundamental presumption of equality in the context of the distribution of wealth.

4.5.2 Presumptive limitarianism and surplus wealth

The second argument for presumptive limitarianism takes as its point of departure the limitarian claim that some people have surplus wealth.[205] As I argued in §4.2, the idea of surplus wealth can be grounded on three different claims, namely that above some threshold wealth has zero moral value, that it is lexically outweighed by some other normative concern(s), or that, in practice, allowing people to have surplus wealth has less moral value than redistributing it. Those who agree that under one or more of those interpretations some people have surplus wealth must endorse presumptive limitarianism.

Recall distributions *C* and *D*.

	Adam	Eve
Distribution C	1	3
Distribution D	4	0

Let us again assume that Jesse must distribute valuable goods between Adam and Eve but that he lacks the relevant information to distribute

[205] I thank an anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* for suggesting this line of argument.

those goods on substantive grounds. Furthermore, let us assume that people exceed the limitarian threshold if they have more than three goods. If the distributions are wealth distributions, this means that in *C* neither Adam nor Eve has surplus wealth and that in *D* Adam has surplus wealth but Eve does not.

Above I argued that the presumption of equality prefers *C* over *D* because *C* is more equal and that this supports presumptive limitarianism by implication. But we can derive a similar conclusion from the observation that only in *C* no one possesses surplus wealth. If, as presumptions in distributive justice entertain, a risk-averse distribution is preferable over a risk-tolerant distribution, then a distribution that redistributes surplus wealth is preferable over a distribution that allows people to have surplus wealth. Between *C* and *D*, then, *C* is the most risk-averse distribution because only in *C* is there no surplus wealth. Therefore, the idea that some people have surplus wealth justifies the limitarian presumption.

One might object here that Adam could be really deserving of four goods, and, because of that, *D* is preferable over *C* on substantive grounds. However, if wealth above the limitarian threshold really is surplus wealth, it is difficult to see how someone could be deserving of it, *morally speaking*. Whatever substantive reasons we have for favouring *D* over *C*, if having more than three goods means that one has surplus wealth, those reasons cannot be that Adam is entitled to four goods. Instead, those reasons must be that allowing Adam to have more than three goods has other morally significant benefits. I will come back to this objection in §4.5.4.

4.5.3 Presumptive limitarianism and epistemic constraints

The third argument for presumptive limitarianism is that decision-makers often lack the epistemic grounds to apply substantive principles for

distributing wealth fairly.[206] Joseph Heath, for example, argues that substantive principles concerning the distribution of labour income fail to give a plausible account of how labour income must be and is in fact distributed.[207] He concludes that markets are structurally unable to deliver 'just' wages because markets only channel labour to its best employment. And a similar case can be made for other economic resources. In an ideal market, for example, capital too is channelled to its most productive usage, where 'productive' means that it increases a specific conception of welfare.

To give another example, luck egalitarians have long since argued that it is often impossible to know what people's relative advantages and disadvantages are in the real world. This point extends to all proponents of substantive principles that require knowledge about individual's comparative standing to specify what distributive justice requires. As Richard Arneson puts it:

> the idea that we might adjust our distributive-justice system based on our estimation of persons' overall deservingness or responsibility seems entirely chimerical. Individuals do not display responsibility scores on their foreheads, and the attempt by institutions or individuals to guess at the scores of people they are dealing with would surely dissolve in practice into giving vent to one's prejudices and piques.[208]

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[206] At least for distributing economic resources from specific sources of income. For example, there is a wide consensus among political philosophers that inheritance taxation is unjust on substantive grounds and that we have the relevant information to track that injustice. Cf. Pedersen 2018.

[207] Cf. Heath 2018.

[208] Arneson 2000c, 97; cf. Dworkin 1981b, 314. See also Herzog 2012.

Hence, although justice is certainly concerned with the distribution of wealth, it is not evident that we know what justice requires regarding that distribution in the actual world on substantive grounds.

However, many people believe that what we do know is what justice more broadly requires.[209] For example, the democratic argument rests on the assumption that justice requires that political equality is secured, and such a commitment to political equality is widely shared. And the needs argument suggests that justice requires that those with urgent needs have priority. If limiting the accumulation of wealth and/or redistributing it promotes those aims, we have presumptive grounds to distribute wealth in such a way that it respects certain limits. And importantly, the democratic argument and the needs argument do not require knowledge about individual persons to specify justice in the allocation of wealth between them. We do not need information about Adam and Eve to specify what presumptive justice in the allocation of wealth between them requires. But, according to the limitarian presumption, what we do know is that a distribution between Adam and Eve in which neither of them exceeds the limitarian threshold is more likely to be compatible with political equality and meeting urgent needs than a distribution in which one of them does exceed that threshold.

Hence, if the democratic argument or the needs argument holds, presumptive limitarianism offers a plausible criterion for distributing wealth if we lack substantive grounds to favour specific distributions. And

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[209] I say 'actual' because one may endorse substantive principles that specify what justice requires if the relevant information is available. For example, if the distribution of economic resources should track the number of hours worked, we would have a clear substantive ground for distributing resources between Adam and Eve *if we know how many hours Adam and Eve have worked*. But I assume here that we lack that information.

if the distribution of wealth is indeed such that it is impossible to know whether it tracks substantive principles, or if it is impossibly complex to apply those substantive principles to actual wealth distributions, presumptive limitarianism supports distributions in which people do not exceed the limitarian threshold.

4.5.4 Three objections to presumptive limitarianism

Let me discuss three objections to the limitarian presumption. The first objection is that presumptive limitarianism falls prey to the same objection as ideal pattern limitarianism because it may fail to secure political equality and meeting urgent needs. This is because it seems to neglect possible allocations of wealth that are to the maximum advantage of the lesser off. For example, consider the following two distributions:

	Adam	Eve
Distribution C	1	3
Distribution F	2	4

Distributions *C* and *F* differ in that the total amount of wealth in each of them is different. In *C*, neither Adam nor Eve exceeds the limitarian threshold of three goods. In *F*, however, Eve does exceed that threshold. But in *F* Adam is better off than in *C*. So which distribution should we prefer? If presumptive limitarianism renders *C* more just, it commits itself to the claim that people should not exceed the threshold, yet it does so at the expense of Adam who could be better off. Yet if it renders *F* more just, it commits itself to a distribution that allows people to exceed the limitarian threshold. This robs presumptive limitarianism of the distinctive limitarian claim that a distribution is unjust if some people exceed the limitarian threshold. Hence, presumptive limitarianism seems implausible here for the same reason as ideal limitarian patterns are implausible.

However, limitarians can say two things in response. The first is that presumptive limitarianism is irrelevant if we have substantive grounds for

favouring certain distributions. If we know that redistributing surplus wealth makes those below the limitarian threshold worse off, the presumptive limitarian reason becomes irrelevant. But it is only because we *know* that Adam is better off in *F* than in *C* that we favour *F* over *C*. This touches upon a crucial difference between patterns and presumptions. Patterns claim that justice-relevant goals, such as securing political equality and meeting urgent needs, can be met by pursuing a specific pattern. On the contrary, presumptions specify risk-averse principles that aim to minimize the harm of possible misallocations of valuable goods in light of epistemic uncertainty. The claim here is *not* that presumptive limitarianism leads to the pattern that will optimally promote the justice-relevant goals, but that it is most likely to do so given the epistemic constraints in place. If there are no such epistemic constraints, however, we no longer have to take the presumption into account.

The second response is that we might in fact believe that *C* is preferable over *F*, at least presumptively, because Adam might be worse off in *F*. Distributions *C* and *F* only indicate how much wealth Adam and Eve have, and it seems that, *from that specific perspective*, Adam is worse off in *C* than in *F* because in the latter distribution he has more wealth. However, that leaves open whether *F* leaves Adam worse off in some other morally valuable domain (e.g. social standing, political equality, etc.) despite the fact that he has more wealth in that distribution. Though presumptive limitarianism specifies what a just allocation of wealth requires, the reasons for defending such limitarianism extend beyond a specific concern for the distribution of wealth as such.

The second objection to presumptive limitarianism is that it offers an account of distributive justice that is too minimal and, furthermore, that it is already entailed in other distributive views. Because presumptive limitarianism only focusses on the superrich, it only offers a partial account of a presumptively just distribution. However, it need not exhaust

what presumptive justice in the distribution of wealth requires, and it can be combined with other presumptions as well.[210] Furthermore, it may indeed be that egalitarianism, prioritarianism, sufficientarianism, and other distributive views could all accept the limitarian presumption when thinking about distributive justice in nonideal circumstances. Yet that is not an objection to presumptive limitarianism; at most, what is shows is that presumptive limitarianism, much like limitarian midlevel principles, can be defended from a variety of different perspectives. That only strengthens the prospects for limitarianism in distributive justice.

The third objection to presumptive limitarianism is that it is redundant because there is always at least *some* knowledge available to decision-makers to apply substantive principles. However, presumptive limitarianism can play a role in such cases too. For example, suppose justice requires distributing wealth based on the number of hours worked and that Adam works twice as many hours as Eve. Does the fact that we know this mean that Adam is entitled to twice as much wealth as Eve no matter what distribution we end up with? That does not follow. For one thing, it is not evident that the conversion of hours into wealth is such that working twice as many hours entitles one to twice as much wealth. Furthermore, it is not evident that distributing wealth on the basis of that substantive principle must guide the entire wealth distribution. For example, Adam and Eve may already have different levels of wealth, which may have a bearing on justice regarding additional benefits. The substantive principle might offer only a partial specification of justice in the distribution of wealth, in which case presumptive limitarianism holds for the remaining economic resources.

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[210] For example, presumptive limitarianism can be combined with a sufficiency threshold. Such a threshold is defended as a minimal requirement for a just distribution under nonideal circumstances in Carey 2020.

In short, the limitarian presumption can be derived from the presumption of equality, from the idea of surplus wealth, and it can be defended as a risk-averse strategy for distributing wealth given epistemic constraints. Those reasons are not mutually exclusive, of course, and may in fact strengthen each other. Yet each of them provides a distinctive case for the presumption of limitarianism in distributive justice.

4.6 Conclusion

The limitarian thesis states that there is a limitarian threshold such that someone has too much wealth if they exceed that threshold. In this article, I have assessed three ways in which the limitarian thesis can be defended in distributive justice, namely as an ideal distributive pattern, as a mid-level principle, and as a presumption. I have argued that limitarianism must be rejected as an ideal principle and that it should be interpreted and developed along nonideal lines instead. More specifically, both as a mid-level principle and as a presumption, limitarianism can play a role in distributive justice. In particular, I have argued that without substantive reasons to the contrary, we have reasons to regard a distribution as unjust if some people's wealth exceeds the limitarian threshold. And given the current disparities in income and wealth between the rich and the poor, and in light of the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a small global elite, limitarianism can play an important role at that.

5 How Much Is Too Much? Political Equality, Urgent Needs, and the Fully Flourishing Life

Abstract. In this paper, I examine how a concern for political equality and meeting urgent needs could justify the claim that people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life. I will argue that the most plausible defence of such limitarianism justifies its wealth limit on two distinct grounds, which are that the wealth limit promotes the relevant values in a normatively coherent way and that such a wealth limit is politically feasible.

5.1 Introduction

In two recent papers, Ingrid Robeyns argues that people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life.[211] She argues that wealth above that threshold should be redistributed to promote political equality and meet unmet urgent needs.[212] I will refer to this view as *flourishing limitarianism*. The central question in this paper is whether, as flourishing limitarianism maintains, a concern for political equality and meeting urgent needs justifies the claim that people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life.

There are three distinct but related issues which motivate a detailed examination of this question. The first concerns what it is exactly that flourishing limitarianism claims and what the strongest possible defence

[211] Cf. Robeyns 2017a; 2019; for discussion, see Zwarthoed 2018; Volacu and Dumitru 2019; Kramm and Robeyns 2020.

[212] For the democratic argument, see Robeyns 2017a, 6–10; 2019, 254–56; cf. Christiano 2012. For the needs argument, see Robeyns 2017a, 10–14; 2019, 257–60. Another argument Robeyns mentions is the ecological argument; see Robeyns 2019, 258–60. Because Robeyns considers the ecological argument to be a specification of the needs argument, I subsume both arguments under the header 'needs argument'.

of that view is in light of that. The second issue concerns whether limitarians should endorse flourishing limitarianism or some other limitarian view. This is important because even if we assume that *some* wealth limit promotes political equality and meeting urgent needs, it is not evident that the flourishing threshold is that particular threshold. And the third issue concerns whether political equality and meeting urgent needs justify a wealth limit in the first place. If they do not, this effectively means that we must reject any type of limitarianism to promote those values. In my view, however, the most fruitful assessment of the overall plausibility of limitarianism starts by identifying how wealth limits are most plausibly defended. This paper is devoted to that specific task and, hence, aims to contribute to the first two debates in particular.

In this paper, I examine what the strongest possible defence of limitarianism entails, both in its flourishing specification and otherwise. I will argue that this defence of limitarianism justifies the limitarian wealth limit on two distinct grounds and acknowledges that trade-offs between those grounds are likely necessary. Those are, first, that the wealth limit promotes the relevant values in a normatively coherent way, and that, second, that threshold is politically feasible.

I develop the argument as follows. In §5.2, I introduce the idea of flourishing limitarianism. In the subsequent sections, I examine four ways in which flourishing limitarians can argue that to promote political equality and meeting urgent needs we must prevent people from having more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life. In §5.3, I examine the perfectionist defence of such a flourishing threshold, which says that flourishing *includes* a concern for political equality and meeting urgent needs and that one cannot live a fully flourishing life if those values are not secured. In §5.4, I examine the defence of the flourishing threshold which says that when promoting political equality and meeting urgent needs, we must factor in the idea that flourishing itself is also a value.

Limitarians can argue that the flourishing threshold is part of the most justifiable way to promote political equality and meeting urgent needs. In §5.5, I examine the political defence of the flourishing threshold, which says that the flourishing threshold is a politically feasible wealth limit that is likely to promote political equality and meeting urgent needs. And in §5.6, I will argue that the strongest possible defence of flourishing limitarianism is a hybrid account that combines the second and third defence of the flourishing threshold.

5.2 Flourishing limitarianism in distributive justice

Flourishing limitarianism says that people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life and that having such a wealth limit promotes political equality and meeting urgent needs. To understand what it is precisely that flourishing limitarianism entails, we must qualify that claim in four ways.[213]

First, flourishing limitarianism is a political doctrine which specifies how agents of justice, such as the state or individuals, must act.[214] It specifies what people owe to each other from the standpoint of justice rather than how they must act from the standpoint of some particular individual morality or ethics. Robeyns suggests some prerequisites for such a life, such as "physical health, mental health, personal security, accommodation, quality of the environment, education, training and knowledge, recreation, leisure and hobbies, and mobility".[215] But this is a tentative list that must be further specified via public democratic procedures.

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[213] See Robeyns 2017a and §4.2.

[214] The question about the agent of justice is debated extensively in the literature. Here I will assume that the agent of justice includes but need not be limited to the state and individuals. For this debate, see for example G. A. Cohen 1997; Pogge 2000; O. O'Neill 2001; Weinberg 2009.

[215] Robeyns 2017a, 26.

Second, flourishing limitarianism is a partial account of distributive justice that focusses on what justice requires from those who live fully flourishing lives. But just because it is a partial account does not mean that flourishing limitarianism is indifferent about what justice requires regarding people who do not live such a life. For example, the concerns for political equality and meeting urgent needs have a bearing on this. Yet at the heart of limitarianism lies a wealth limit, and the claim that some people have too much wealth applies to those who are above that wealth limit.

Third, flourishing limitarianism does not say that having more wealth than is necessary for a fully flourishing life is morally impermissible in itself. Instead, it says that having such wealth is morally impermissible *because that wealth undermines political equality and could be used to meet urgent needs*. There may be limitarian views which do say that having more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing is in itself unjust.[216] However, I do not consider such intrinsic limitarianism here and only discuss instrumental limitarianism.

Fourth, flourishing limitarianism is a non-ideal view that starts from the current wealth distribution rather than from an idealized wealth distribution.[217] It does not claim that a concern for political equality and meeting urgent needs requires that people never have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life. Instead, it says that people should not exceed that threshold in our world and possible worlds similar to it, given the current vastly unequal wealth distribution. Contrarily,

[216] For example, Robeyns (2017a, 5) suggests that there may be intrinsic limitarian views based on virtue, paternalism, and perfectionism.

[217] There are possible perfectionist limitarian views which are ideal views rather than non-ideal views. Here, however, I leave those ideal views aside.

however, if everyone is super-rich, flourishing limitarianism will simply not be a relevant view.

Hence, flourishing limitarianism is a political, partial, instrumental, non-ideal view about distributive justice. I want to highlight three things that these four qualifications suggest about flourishing limitarianism. The first is that one can be a flourishing limitarian without saying that wealth limits are either necessary or sufficient to secure political equality and meet urgent needs. Such a wealth limit is not necessary because there are possible worlds that are perfectly just yet allow people to have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life.[218] Furthermore, flourishing limitarianism does not say that its threshold is sufficient to secure political equality and meet urgent needs. That would be an absurd view. It is easy to imagine situations in which no one lives a fully flourishing life yet political equality is not secured and urgent needs are not met. Flourishing limitarianism, then, does not say that the flourishing threshold is either necessary or sufficient to secure those values. Instead, it justifies its wealth limit by saying that it *promotes* political equality and meeting urgent needs.

This relates to the second point I want to highlight. As a political, partial, instrumental, non-ideal view, flourishing limitarianism is not so much about ideals but about moving away from an unjust *status quo*.[219] Against the background of the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the super-rich, and in light of a concern for political equality and meeting

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[218] This is not true for *intrinsic limitarianism*, because that view entails that a perfectly just world is characterized by limitarian wealth limits. But I leave this intrinsic interpretation of limitarianism aside.

[219] Therefore, flourishing limitarianism is an example of 'constructive public policy ethics', which says that "one's moral position on policy matters can (and sometimes ought to) be formed independently of the recommendations given by any one particular foundational theory" (Poama 2018, 37).

urgent needs, flourishing limitarianism posits a limit to how much wealth people can have. At its core, then, flourishing limitarianism is a view about where to start rather than a view about where to go.

The third point is that flourishing limitarianism posits a threshold that is valuable for people to reach but which they should not be allowed to exceed.[220] For that reason, I regard flourishing limitarianism as a type of *sufficiency limitarianism* which says that it is valuable for people to live a fully flourishing life yet maintains that it is morally impermissible to have more wealth than is needed to live such a life. However, other limitarian views might say that it is not valuable for people to reach the limitarian threshold but only say that it is morally impermissible to exceed it. They could say, for example, that the wealth limit does not denote an amount of wealth that is valuable for people to have but only an amount of wealth that they should not be allowed to have. Here, however, I will assume that there is at least some moral value in allowing people to reach the limitarian threshold.

In sum, flourishing limitarianism is a political, partial, instrumental, non-ideal view about distributive justice which says that in our world and possible worlds similar to it, which are characterized by wealth inequality, unfair political power, and unmet urgent needs, people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life. It proposes such a threshold not as a necessary or sufficient means to promote those values but as a normative claim that pushes away from an unjust

[220] Though I take this to be a plausible reading of flourishing limitarianism, Robeyns (2017a; 2019) does not say whether the fully flourishing life is morally valuable in this sense. In theory, then, flourishing limitarians could say that living a fully flourishing life is not valuable but only a standard via which the limitarian threshold is determined. If so, flourishing limitarianism need not entail that it is valuable for people to reach the flourishing threshold.

status quo. Hence, flourishing limitarians regard their wealth limit as part of a package of different distributive principles which, together, are the most justifiable means to promote political equality and meeting urgent needs in our world.

5.3 The perfectionist defence of the flourishing threshold

Flourishing limitarianism claims that because of a concern for political equality and meeting urgent needs, people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing. Therefore, flourishing limitarians must show why *this* threshold, i.e. the threshold above which people can live a fully flourishing life, should be adopted to promote *those* values, i.e. political equality and meeting urgent needs.[221] They must defend this view against the views of two different opponents. The first opponent agrees that *some* wealth limit would promote political equality and meeting urgent needs but rejects the suggestion that the flourishing threshold is that particular wealth limit. The second rejects the idea that promoting those values requires any type of wealth limit. Both opponents, however, reject the flourishing threshold.

The first defence of the flourishing threshold is to include a concern for political equality and meeting urgent needs when specifying what it means to live a fully flourishing life. This requires a different conception of flourishing from the one that Robeyns defends. In Robeyns' view, the flourishing threshold exclusively focusses on the material side of flourishing. It excludes "functionings that do not have a material basis, but that belong more to the political, social, or spiritual dimensions of life".[222] In opposition to this, for example, eudaimonist theories, which put

[221] According to one interpretation of flourishing limitarianism, flourishing is itself also a value. I elaborate on this in §5.4.

[222] Robeyns 2017a, 25.

flourishing at the core of their ethics, may support the idea that wealth is not unimportant for living a flourishing life. Yet such theories insist that there is much more than just a material dimension to flourishing. Similarly, flourishing limitarians can include a concern for political equality and meeting urgent needs in their conception of flourishing. They can endorse the following view:

> *Perfectionist flourishing limitarianism:* the flourishing threshold promotes political equality and meeting urgent needs because one cannot live a fully flourishing life if political equality is not secured and urgent needs are not met.

It is important to be very clear about what exactly this perfectionist conception of flourishing entails. It does not simply state what some may consider to be a simple truism, namely that I cannot live a fully flourishing life if my basic needs are not met and my political liberties are not secured. Instead, this perfectionist conception of flourishing could entail that *I* cannot live a fully flourishing life if *your* basic needs are not met and/or *your* political liberties are not secured. Or it could entail that I cannot live a fully flourishing life if you do not have real opportunities to have your basic needs met or real opportunities to have your basic liberties secured. If this conception of flourishing holds, then the threshold that signals the point above which someone can live a fully flourishing life must, by definition, promote political equality and meeting the urgent needs of both those living a fully flourishing life *and* those not living such a life. It would be impossible for the flourishing threshold to *not* promote political equality and meeting urgent needs.

However, this defence of the flourishing threshold draws on a more comprehensive conception of flourishing than the one I have so far attributed to flourishing limitarianism. This makes flourishing limitarianism unappealing for people who reject that conception of flourishing but

who could agree that, say, limiting wealth is a valuable means to promote political equality and meeting urgent needs. Those people, however, are important allies of flourishing limitarianism regarding defending a wealth limit. Hence, if limitarianism aims to move away from an unjust *status quo*, it is imprudent to draw on a conception of flourishing that is very specific, and, as I will argue, unnecessarily so.[223] Instead, flourishing limitarians might be better advised to draw on a conception of flourishing that is more open to different views.

5.4 Prioritizing the flourishing threshold

Instead of arguing that living a fully flourishing life requires that political equality is secured and that urgent needs are met, flourishing limitarians can defend the flourishing threshold by saying that flourishing is itself *also* a value. For example, flourishing limitarians can endorse the following view:

> *Prioritized flourishing limitarianism (lexical)*: the flourishing threshold promotes political equality, meeting urgent needs, and flourishing.[224]

This defence of the claim that people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life entails that the flourishing threshold is responsive to all the values that flourishing limitarianism must

[223] For example, if limitarianism is a midlevel principle, limitarians may prefer a conception of flourishing that is more likely to be compatible with a wide variety of different perspectives instead of a very substantive conception of flourishing. For midlevel limitarianism, see §4.4.

[224] I distinguish between this lexical version of prioritized flourishing limitarianism and a weighted version of that view. The lexical version gives absolute priority to flourishing when weighing the different values, whereas the weighted version only gives weighted priority to flourishing (see below).

promote. This includes but is not limited to political equality and meeting urgent needs. Such responsiveness between flourishing, political equality, and urgent needs does not just mean that *my* flourishing is responsive to *my* urgent needs and *my* political liberties. This is obviously true. I cannot live a fully flourishing life if my basic needs are not met. Yet what such responsiveness also requires is that a concern for my flourishing is weighted against a concern for *your* unmet urgent needs and *your* political liberties.[225] This implies that there may be trade-offs between allowing someone to live a fully flourishing life and allowing someone else's political liberties to be secured or their urgent needs to be met. But those trade-offs only show that not all values can be maximally promoted at the same time, which is something many theories of justice and not just flourishing limitarianism must grapple with.

However, it must still be shown why the flourishing threshold is part of the package that strikes the most justifiable balance between political equality, meeting urgent needs, and flourishing. Limitarians have two ways to argue for this. First, they can argue that flourishing has *lexical priority* over political equality and meeting urgent needs. If so, those values should be promoted on condition that they do not upset people's ability to live a fully flourishing life. Whether such lexical priority justifies the flourishing threshold depends on whether the wealth limit that optimally promotes political equality and meeting urgent needs while securing flourishing is indeed that threshold. It cannot be a lower wealth limit because that would harm flourishing. However, it could be a *higher* threshold if such a higher threshold would better promote political equality and

[225] Unlike with the perfectionist conception of flourishing, in this case my flourishing does not *depend* on your basic needs being met and your political liberties being secured. It only requires that those different concerns are balanced.

meeting urgent needs.[226] But if flourishing has lexical priority, this gives us a presumptive case in favour of the flourishing threshold being a wealth limit to balance political equality, unmet needs, and flourishing.

Second, flourishing limitarians can non-lexically weigh political equality, meeting urgent needs, and flourishing and argue that the flourishing threshold is a good proxy for the resulting threshold. For example, they could endorse the following view:

> *Prioritized flourishing limitarianism (weighted)*: The flourishing–democratic–needs threshold promotes political equality, meeting urgent needs, and flourishing.

The flourishing–democratic–needs threshold is determined by assigning non-lexical value to political equality, meeting urgent needs, and flourishing. It is one possible wealth limit along those lines, but one can think of others as well (e.g. 'democratic–needs threshold' or 'flourishing–needs threshold'). And even the flourishing–democratic–needs threshold can be specified in various ways, as different flourishing limitarians could assign different non-lexical weight to political equality, meeting urgent needs, and flourishing.

The flourishing threshold is a different wealth limit from the flourishing–democratic–needs threshold. However, its *level* is likely to approximate that of the flourishing–democratic–needs threshold. A weighted

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[226] Flourishing limitarianism could also give lexical priority to political equality or meeting urgent needs. However, promoting one of those values does not seem to require a limitarian threshold. Promoting political equality primarily requires equalizing wealth, and meeting urgent needs requires a sufficientarian distribution. So if we give lexical priority to political equality or meeting needs, it is unclear whether the resulting distribution would impose wealth limits rather than deploy other means to achieve its goal, such as equalizing resources.

concern for flourishing will not push the flourishing–democratic–needs threshold above the flourishing threshold, and neither will a weighted concern for political equality or a weighted concern for meeting urgent needs. This is because political equality is indifferent regarding people having more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life. Promoting that value primarily requires a sufficiently equal distribution of wealth. That leaves the needs argument: does allowing people to have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life benefit those with urgent needs? I am inclined to think that it does not. *If* that is true, the flourishing–democratic–needs threshold may be lower than the flourishing threshold if the concern for meeting urgent needs pushes the threshold downwards. But the level of the flourishing threshold is a good proxy of the *maximum* level of the flourishing–democratic–needs threshold.

Hence, flourishing limitarians can defend prioritizing flourishing limitarianism in either its lexical or its weighted form. However, there are two problems with prioritized flourishing limitarianism as a defence for the flourishing threshold. First, showing that the relevant wealth limit promotes the relevant values in a normatively coherent way constitutes only part of limitarianism's prospects in distributive justice. A threshold that fails to resonate with the likely forms of reasoning in the political practice of decision-makers and the broader public, for example, is less likely to give valuable guidance for institutional design and individual action. And the same can be said of a threshold that is precise yet impossible to determine without implausibly assuming all the relevant knowledge.[227] The question, then, is whether prioritized flourishing limitarianism gives sufficient guidance for picking a particular wealth limit as the limitarian threshold.

[227] On the problem of knowledge in non-ideal theory, see Herzog 2012.

Second, and more generally, this defence assumes that the complex process of value aggregation justifies a wealth limit. This reverts to a more classic argument for distributive justice along familiar egalitarian, sufficientarian, and prioritarian lines, which turns into a debate about when, say, people's political claims on others or a concern for their basic needs is stronger than other people's claim to their property. But even if flourishing has lexical priority over political equality and meeting urgent needs, this does not justify the claim that people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life. It only shows that allowing people to live such a life is more important than securing political equality and meeting urgent needs. But it does not follow from the fact that flourishing is more important than those other values that we must defend the flourishing threshold instead of other ways of promoting those values.

Since my aim in this paper is not to defend limitarianism against critics of wealth limits directly but to first and foremost examine what the most plausible defence of limitarianism should look like, I want to highlight this objection to prioritized flourishing limitarianism but I will not aim to give a definitive response to it. I take it that the structure of the response should be something like this. It must be shown that the flourishing threshold promotes the relevant values in a normatively coherent way and that the flourishing threshold is politically feasible. That threshold must then be assessed in comparison to feasible non-limitarian ways of promoting those same values. If and only if the limitarian threshold better promotes those values than the other option, where 'better' is a function of feasibility, effectiveness, and perhaps some other desiderata, should it be defended.

5.5 Politicizing the flourishing threshold

Instead of defending the flourishing threshold by saying that flourishing is a value, flourishing limitarians can defend that threshold by referring to considerations of political feasibility. They could endorse the following view:

> *Politicized flourishing limitarianism:* in practice, the flourishing threshold promotes political equality and meeting urgent needs.

Flourishing limitarians can argue that, in practice, preventing people from having more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life promotes political equality and meeting urgent needs. For this to be the case, flourishing itself need not be a value like political equality or meeting urgent needs. It only needs to be a valuable guideline for determining a wealth limit that promotes those values. Other ways of establishing such a limit may be untenable. There may be disagreement about the relative weight of political equality and meeting urgent needs. Or it may simply be unclear how high the threshold should be even if there is agreement on how the values must be weighted. The flourishing threshold can help overcome such impasses.

The challenge for politicized flourishing limitarianism is to show why the amount of wealth that is necessary to live a fully flourishing life is a reliable way to determine the level of a wealth limit that promotes political equality and meeting urgent needs. Unlike in prioritized flourishing limitarianism, there is no direct responsiveness between the flourishing threshold and political equality and meeting urgent needs. Yet flourishing limitarians can offer at least three reasons that support the flourishing threshold, each of which takes the circumstances under which it is defended as its point of departure. Taken together, those reasons suggest that if the flourishing threshold is politically feasible and a plausible proxy

for a wealth limit that promotes political equality and meeting urgent needs, then this justifies flourishing limitarianism.

First, the idea of flourishing may resonate with the ideological context and the likely forms of reasoning made by the relevant parties. This increases the prospects for flourishing limitarianism by making it more likely that its policy recommendations will be endorsed. In line with this, Danielle Zwarthoed maintains that the limitarian threshold should be close to what the broader public thinks it should be.[228] To illustrate, two recent studies suggest that people believe that there is a riches line above which someone has more than enough wealth.[229] In a qualitative study conducted in London by Davis et al., the focus groups agreed that people have reached this level once they "own many houses outright (without a mortgage) in several countries, to the point where they did not really go 'on holiday' per se, but chose to spend time in their homes around the world" and "own private jets, supercars and yachts and would employ a range of staff, including a chauffeur, gardener, dog walker, housekeeper, chef, butler and some kind of security service, and staff to manage their staff".[230] And they identified a slightly lower standard of living as being sufficient to reach this level as well.[231] Subsequently, Robeyns et al. found

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[228] Cf. Zwarthoed 2018, 1196.

[229] Davis et al. 2020; Robeyns et al. 2021. Both studies found that people can identify a descriptive riches line above which they deem that people have more than enough but not a normative riches line above which they deem that people have too much.

[230] Davis et al. 2020, 24.

[231] Such as when people "were more likely to work because they chose to, rather than because they were compelled to" and when there "would be additional income streams from a range of other sources including property rental, shares and dividends, offshore investments [...] and inheritance. In order to manage

that a representative sample of the Dutch population agrees with a similar riches line.[232] For example, 96.5% of the respondents said that they regard a family as 'extremely rich' if they own a villa with a private swimming pool, a second home, a Mercedes and a Porsche, go on holiday at least five times a year, and have 70 million euros in savings. Flourishing limitarians can argue that such widely shared beliefs could function as the point of departure in establishing a wealth limit that promotes political equality and meeting urgent needs.

Second, the flourishing threshold gives a clear indication of how high the limitarian threshold should be. Assessing how much wealth is necessary to live such a fully flourishing life is not an easy task, of course, but such an assessment resembles how other thresholds in social policy are set, such as the poverty threshold or the social minimum.[233] This has obvious advantages in institutional design and policy making that the complex process of value aggregation described earlier does not have. Hence, if the amount of wealth that is necessary to live a fully flourishing life is a *proxy* for a wealth limit that is politically feasible and can plausibly be taken to promote political equality and meeting urgent needs, the flourishing threshold can be defended on the grounds that it approximates that limitarian threshold.

Third, and relatedly, flourishing limitarians can defend the idea that people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life on the grounds that having *a* limitarian threshold is preferable

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their finances people were likely to have private banking and a wealth manager who would assist with a broad spectrum of services including legal matters, accounting and tax advice" (Davis et al. 2020, 23–24).

[232] Cf. Robeyns et al. 2021.

[233] Robeyns devotes much attention to how the flourishing threshold could be established. See Robeyns 2017a, 18–30.

over having none and that this flourishing threshold happens to be a threshold that is broadly supported and can be readily applied.

These three reasons combined strengthen the case for flourishing limitarianism. Flourishing limitarians can accept that the flourishing threshold is not the best conceivable limitarian threshold for promoting political equality and meet urgent needs, but maintain that it plausibly approximates that threshold and does so better than any available alternative threshold. More generally, they can say that this flourishing threshold is not the best conceivable policy for promoting political equality and meeting urgent needs, but maintain that it approximates such a policy and does so better than any available alternative policy. If the idea that people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life resonates with widespread beliefs about what people owe to each other, this counts in favour of defending the flourishing threshold on political grounds.

5.6 A hybrid defence of the flourishing threshold

That brings me to the fourth defence of the claim that people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life. The strongest possible defence of flourishing limitarianism offers two distinctive justifications for the flourishing threshold. The first is that flourishing is a value that has priority over other values and that, consequently, the flourishing threshold is part of the most justifiable package for promoting political equality and meeting urgent needs. The second is that the flourishing threshold resonates with the ideological context in which political equality and meeting urgent needs should be promoted and with the likely forms of reasoning used by decision-makers and the broader public. That threshold may not optimally promote the values that flourishing limitarianism aims to promote, but it can plausibly function as a proxy for such a strategy because it has both theoretical and political considerations that

speak in its favour. This combination of two types of arguments provides, in my view, the strongest case in favour of flourishing limitarianism.

Yet there is one specific feature of such flourishing limitarianism that I believe limitarians could do without. Paradoxically, when justifying a wealth limit, the most important function of the flourishing threshold is *not* to denote the point above which people can live a fully flourishing life but, instead, to denote the point above which increases in their individual flourishing are less important than promoting other moral values. The role of the flourishing threshold, then, is first and foremost to denote the point above which wealth counts as excessive wealth. The feature of flourishing limitarianism that limitarians could and, arguably, should do without is that what explains why such wealth counts as excessive wealth is that it fails to contribute to the holder's flourishing.

The question of whether additional wealth contributes to the flourishing of billionaires is certainly an important question, though. If increases in wealth could always increase their flourishing, some people might think that if a billionaire stands to gain enough from additional wealth, their claim to such wealth can outweigh the claim to wealth of people who are far less well off. Against those specific views, and in that specific context, *if* above some threshold wealth no longer contributes to flourishing, this strengthens the case for limitarianism. However, even if a billionaire's flourishing could be improved, morally speaking, with an additional billion dollars, the fact that hundreds of millions of people around the world live in extreme poverty can justify redistributing that wealth anyway. That is, limitarianism can be defended even if there is no point above which wealth fails to contribute to flourishing. All limitarianism requires is that there is a point above which people's claim to additional wealth is outweighed by other normative concerns.

Recognizing this broadens the scope of limitarianism. For example, for many prominent conceptions of value based on welfare, primary

goods, resources, and other metrics, having more is always better for someone, even if the marginal utility of additional benefits moves asymptotically to zero. Proponents of those metrics might support limitarianism given the circumstances in which it aims to offer guidance, which includes the vastly unequal current distribution of wealth, even if they reject the justification that flourishing limitarianism gives for capping wealth above some threshold. For that reason, limitarians should focus on the claim that above some threshold people's claim to additional wealth is outweighed by other normative concerns instead of on the claim that above that threshold wealth no longer contributes to flourishing.

5.7 Conclusion

The central question of this paper was how a concern for political equality and meeting urgent needs can justify the claim that people should not have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life. To establish this claim, flourishing limitarians can argue that flourishing includes a concern for political equality and meeting urgent needs, that the flourishing threshold is part of the most defensible package of distributive principles which combined promote flourishing, political equality, and meeting urgent needs, or that the flourishing threshold can be justified on the basis of political considerations. I have argued that a combination of the second and third strategies in particular is a fruitful line along which flourishing limitarianism can be defended. Moreover, I have argued that limitarians might move away from the claim that wealth above the limitarian threshold cannot contribute to someone's flourishing and instead focus on the claim that above some wealth limit people's claim to additional wealth is outweighed by other normative concerns.

6 Defending the Democratic Argument for Limitarianism: A Reply to Volacu and Dumitru*

Abstract. Volacu and Dumitru have argued that limitarianism places an excessive and inefficient burden on the rich and that even if it succeeds in limiting wealth it still fails to secure political equality. In this paper, I argue that the Incentive Objection fails because limitarians can appeal to limitarian policies that are different from the ones discussed by Volacu and Dumitru and which escape the problem of reduced productivity. I argue against the Efficacy Objection that limitarian policies are a partial but highly valuable step towards establishing political equality, and that they can and should complement or be complemented by other strategies.

6.1 Introduction

Limitarianism is a partial view in distributive justice which claims that under non-ideal circumstances it is morally impermissible to be rich.[234] In a recent paper, Alexandru Volacu and Adelin Costin Dumitru level two arguments against Ingrid Robeyns' *Democratic Argument* for limitarianism,

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[234] Cf. Robeyns 2017a, 1. To clarify, limitarianism is a partial view about distributive justice because it holds that limiting wealth is necessary but not sufficient for a fair distribution. As a non-ideal doctrine, limitarianism starts "from the distribution of the possession of income and wealth as it is, rather than asking what a just distribution would be in a world with strong idealized properties" (Robeyns 2017a, 2).

which I will label the *Incentive Objection* and the *Efficacy Objection*.[235] In this paper, I will argue that both of these objections fail, but on separate grounds.

The Democratic Argument states that limitarianism is called for given the undermining influence current income and wealth inequalities have on democracy and the value of political equality.[236] More precisely, the argument runs as follows: political equality requires that nobody should have more or less political influence just because they are richer. However, excessive wealth allows the rich more political influence precisely because they are richer. This means that excessive wealth threatens political equality. Therefore, to the extent that limitarianism limits excessive wealth, limitarianism is pro tanto justified as a means to promote political equality.

Volacu and Dumitru argue that the Democratic Argument proposes what they call *strong limitarianism* rather than *weak limitarianism*, which means that the argument "advocates taxing any income above the riches line [...] at 100%," rather than the 'weaker' policy of seeking "to enact revenue-maximising tax policies".[237] In light of that, the Incentive Objection against the Democratic Argument holds that strong limitarianism places an excessive and inefficient burden on the rich in ensuring political equality. The Efficacy Objection holds that even if limitarianism limits

[235] Cf. Volacu and Dumitru 2019.

[236] Cf. Robeyns 2017a, 6–10; Volacu and Dumitru 2019, 252, 253, 254–58.

[237] Volacu and Dumitru 2019, 253, 261. The distinction between strong limitarianism and weak limitarianism is introduced by Volacu and Dumitru but is not used by Robeyns. Weak limitarianism, Volacu and Dumitru argue, is called for by Robeyns' second argument for limitarianism, namely the Argument from Unmet Urgent Needs. See Robeyns 2017a, 10–14. Volacu and Dumitru (2019, 258–62) adopt a specific version of this argument combined with a responsibility-catering interpretation of weak limitarianism.

excessive wealth it still fails to ensure the preservation of political equality. In what follows, I will first distinguish distributive limitarianism and policy limitarianism as two interpretations of Robeyns' limitarian doctrine, and elaborate on some conceptual issues regarding policy limitarianism and limitarian policies (§6.2). I will then argue that the Incentive objection fails because one could appeal to limitarian policies that are different from the ones discussed by Volacu and Dumitru and which escape the problem of reduced productivity (§6.3). I argue against the Efficacy Objection that limitarian policies are a partial but highly valuable step towards establishing political equality, and that they can and should be complemented with other strategies (§6.4).

6.2 Distributive limitarianism and policy limitarianism

In her article, Robeyns sets limitarianism on a par with pattern-sensitive distributive principles such as egalitarianism, sufficientarianism, and prioritarianism.[238] I will call this *distributive limitarianism*. According to distributive limitarianism, a fair distribution of the metric of justice, e.g. primary goods or capabilities, requires that no-one has more than a certain amount of that metric. However, the explicit focus on wealth and income of limitarianism suggests a second interpretation, which we can label *policy limitarianism.* Policy limitarianism holds that policies which limit the amount of income or wealth an individual can possess constitute the normatively appropriate steps to bring about a more just state of affairs.[239] Though neither Robeyns nor Volacu and Dumitru make the

[238] Cf. Robeyns 2017a, 1.

[239] A different way to state this argument is to say that Volacu and Dumitru's so-called "institutional measures view" is not an alternative to limitarianism, but that limitarianism explores specific institutional measures. See Volacu and Dumitru 2019, 255–56.

distinction between distributive limitarianism and policy limitarianism, it is clear from at least Volacu and Dumitru's arguments that they have limitarian policies rather than limitarian distributive principles in mind when assessing limitarianism.[240] However, if limitarianism is indeed about policies rather than principles, limitarians have more policies at their disposal than weak limitarianism and strong limitarianism, or so I will argue.

As I understand it, policy limitarianism is a non-ideal and partial view on how to instantiate and promote certain values, such as political equality, equal social status, or mental wellbeing. The non-ideality refers to the fact that limitarian policies are supposed to limit excessive wealth to promote those values in light of the actual distribution of income and wealth. Policy limitarianism does not rely on the claim that wealth is morally wrong in itself. The claim is rather that there are benefits to focusing on excessive wealth to promote political equality. Under non-ideal circumstances policies which tackle inequality rather than riches may not be enough to fight the distortion of excessive wealth on political equality among members of a society. For example because of the still and rapidly increasing accumulation of wealth by the so-called 1% despite the fact that many redistributive measures have already been taken by democratic governments.[241] Hence, even if the underlying problem is inequality in political power resulting from inequalities in wealth, we have reasons to explore measures which directly target excessive wealth. Whether or not such measures are efficient and effective is something to which I will turn later on.

Limitarian policies, then, are justified by referring to convictions about moral values and principles, and by empirical facts about which policies (if any) will actually instantiate, promote or otherwise deliver on

[240] For example, see Volacu and Dumitru 2019, 253, 255, 258–59.

[241] Cf. Piketty 2014.

those values and principles. Partiality refers to the fact that limitarian policies are not *sufficient* to establish political equality. They may not even be *necessary* to establish political equality, depending on what one understands the non-ideal circumstances to be precisely. Below, however, I will argue that limitarian policies are one of the most promising strategies to combat political inequality for a variety of reasons. I will elaborate on these reasons when responding to the Incentive Objection and the Efficacy Objection.

Before doing so, let me briefly comment on what makes a policy 'limitarian', because this will play an important role in the response to both objections. A policy can be limitarian in structure or in aim (or both). A policy is limitarian in structure if it directly targets the amount of wealth individuals can appropriate, e.g. a maximum wage or a tax on capital income. The reason to employ such policies need not be a concern for the excessively wealthy as such. One may also draw on limitarian policies to, for example, ensure just or fair wages or to fight unfair advantages due to natural luck; or, indeed, to protect political equality. A policy is limitarian in aim if its goal is to establish social structures that will tend not to bring about excessive individual wealth. A policy is limitarian both in structure and in aim if it establishes social structures that will tend not to bring about excessive individual wealth by directly targeting the amount of wealth individuals can appropriate.

We can further refine the concept of limitarian policies by adding the notions of redistribution and predistribution.[242] Redistributive limitarian policies limit excessive wealth for the purpose of reallocating the benefits of social cooperation through tax-and-transfer policies. Both weak limitarianism and strong limitarianism are variations on such redistributive limitarian policies. Predistributive limitarian policies aim to limit

[242] I thank an anonymous reviewer of *Philosophia* for this suggestion.

excessive wealth via manipulation of initial holdings in order to generate a fair distribution of opportunities, for example via inheritance tax.[243] I will turn to this distinction below in response to the Incentive Objection.

6.3 The incentive objection

The Incentive Objection asserts that strong limitarianism disincentivizes the rich to be maximally productive, and that we have moral reasons to avert that. Hence, even if limitarian policies would in fact establish political equality, there are overriding reasons to shy away from using such measures. Volacu and Dumitru, for example, say that strong limitarianism "would make it harder to move towards the goal of meeting [unmet urgent needs], since the fiscal policy it prescribes would not be revenue-maximizing."[244] And even if all urgent needs are met and political equality is established, strong limitarianism may still have significant harmful effects. This is because the benevolent rich do much more to establish justice, such as engaging "in activities associated with combating climate change, [or contributing] to the establishment and development of democracy-building non-governmental organisations in countries that are in a process of transition from autocratic or totalitarian regimes to democratic ones"[245]. However, if strong limitarianism is adopted, Volacu and Dumitru argue, "instead of having an ample amount of surplus money which they could donate to these causes, the benevolent rich would have to relinquish all of it"[246].

Though I will argue that the Incentive Objection ultimately fails to refute the Democratic Argument, it rightly stresses that policies which

[243] Cf. Dietsch 2010.

[244] Volacu and Dumitru 2019, 256.

[245] Volacu and Dumitru 2019, 256.

[246] Volacu and Dumitru 2019, 256.

incentivize people to be maximally productive may threaten political equality, and policies which promote political equality may disincentivize individuals. In fact, all policies, including limitarian ones, are trade-offs between different values. But even if limitarianism has negative effects on the incentives of the rich (which is, in the end, an empirical question), that does not mean that limitarianism must be abandoned. That choice ultimately depends on the trade-offs one is willing to make, e.g. between economic growth, wellbeing, and political equality. However, and to respond to the Incentive Objection more directly, the trade-off between political equality and productivity need not be as serious as Volacu and Dumitru suggest. This is partly because they underestimate the kinds of policies that are at a limitarian's disposal, and partly because they overestimate the good that is done by the rich. Let me now turn to these claims in turn.

First, Volacu and Dumitru's combination of the Democratic Argument with strong limitarianism excludes a broad array of possible and arguably much more attractive limitarian policies that promote political equality. To illustrate, recall the distinction between redistributive limitarianism and predistributive limitarianism. There are many variations in redistributive and predistributive policies, and they have different effects on incentives. Volacu and Dumitru, however, give only two very specific limitarian policies. Another limitarian policy would be a high inheritance tax. Some philosophers and economists argue that an inheritance tax, which could be limitarian both in structure and in aim, disincentivizes people to be maximally productive.[247] Such an objection to a 'limitarian' inheritance tax echoes Volacu and Dumitru's concern for the levelling down tendency of strong limitarianism. However, one may question

[247] E.g. Haslett 1986; McCaffery 2000.

whether the effects of an inheritance on productivity are indeed that severe.[248]

More importantly, there may be alternative taxation schemes that are fairer and but still revenue-maximizing. The central claim about why the Incentive Objection fails rests on the possibility of predistributive limitarian policies which target the accumulation of wealth without being disincentivizing and bad for productivity. Though this requires extensive empirical research possible examples of such schemes may be found in James Meade and Daniel Halliday.[249] Let me discuss Halliday's interpretation of the Rignano scheme as an example. The core feature of the Rignano scheme is that it makes inheritance tax sensitive not to the monetary value of the inheritance alone but also to its age.[250] This means that individuals are incentivized to be productive, because they can—depending on the details of the scheme—only bequeath (part of) the wealth they acquire if it is more than they received from their parents. This has two important benefits over common inheritance tax schemes which mainly target the amount of wealth transferred rather than its age. Though it is difficult to pin down exactly what makes people want to bequeath wealth, one often evoked explanation is their wish to leave something to their children or relatives. If this is true, the Incentive Objection would suggest that without the option to bequeath, one takes away an important incentive for people to be maximally productive. Being soft on first-generation transfers, as proposed by the Rignano scheme, incentivizes people to be productive because the more productive they are, the more they will be able to give. This takes away the main worry raised by the Incentive Objection. Furthermore, being increasingly strict on second-, third- and nth-generation transfers

[248] Cf. Conesa, Kitao, and Krueger 2009; Piketty and Saez 2013.

[249] Cf. Meade 2012; Halliday 2018.

[250] Cf. Rignano 1924, 37–38.

helps to curb the accumulation of wealth and prevents economic segregation over time.[251] This, in turn, ties in with the main rationale behind the Democratic Argument for limitarianism.

Hence, the first response to the Incentive Objection is that the trade-off between political equality and productivity via limitarian policies need not be as stark as Volacu and Dumitru suggest. There are other, and arguably better, ways to slow down or stop the accumulation of excessive wealth whilst encouraging individuals to be productive. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that limitarian policies are only a partial means to promote political equality. Perhaps that when assessed as an isolated strategy strong limitarianism would indeed be the most effective means to promote political equality, but if we compare it to and view it in relation with other policies (e.g. weak limitarianism) strong limitarianism loses much of its initial appeal.

The second response to the Incentive Objection stresses that apart from underestimating the range of limitarian policies, Volacu and Dumitru overestimate the good that is done by the rich and by allowing extreme wealth. To start with, Volacu and Dumitru hold that the benevolent rich further justice, meet unmet urgent needs and establish other kinds of goods.[252] However, it is far from evident that the benevolent rich are fair and just distributive agents, as Dumitru and Volacu suggest.[253] This ties in with the issues about cognitive biases and economic inequality that we will turn to below, as well as with the question how much good is *in fact* being done by the benevolent rich. However, if the benevolent rich are fair agents of justice, limitarian policies need not be detrimental to philanthropy

[251] For a more elaborate description of the Rignano scheme and some reflections on its relation to incentives, see Halliday 2018, 58–72, 194–197.

[252] Cf. Volacu and Dumitru 2019, 256.

[253] Cf. Gomberg 2002; Slim 2002.

either. For example, not excessively rich but still affluent people could pool their resources and donate it to charity.[254] If so, they could still donate money to charity (one could even use policies which promote such donations). Hence, there are ways to mitigate the effects on the benefits of philanthropy even if limitarian policies lead to leveling down, and assuming that the benevolent rich are fair agents of justice in the first place.

Furthermore, there is a deeper worry with extreme wealth and vast wealth inequalities that Volacu and Dumitru do not address.[255] Whether or not the rich are fair and just, extreme wealth creates power outside the political sphere as well and, in that way, creates pernicious domination.[256] Wealth can be used to encroach on the liberty of others, thereby exercising enormous power over their every-day life. In real life, under the current distribution of wealth, the purchasing power of the very wealthy ranges over schools, land, houses, factories, companies, hospitals, etc. and through this they gain enormous power over the lives people are living. Hence, the mere fact that they are wealthy is problematic due to domination in non-political areas of life. This means that possible benefits of allowing the rich to meet unmet urgent needs and establish other kinds of goods must be weighed against worries about power and pernicious domination.

6.4 The efficacy objection

Recall that the Democratic Argument holds that to the extent that limitarianism limits excessive wealth, limitarianism is pro tanto justified as a

[254] Volacu and Dumitru (2019, 257–58) concede as much when they argue that limitarian policies are ineffective because they do not prevent the pooling of wealth by a few to gain political influence. On this point, see §6.4.

[255] I thank an anonymous reviewer of *Philosophia* for this argument.

[256] For example, see G. A. Cohen 1995, 34–37; Anderson 1990, 192–201.

means to promote political equality. But what if there is no direct relation between limiting wealth and furthering political equality? What if, as the Efficacy Objection holds, limitarian policies can "in fact not [guarantee] to genuinely safeguard political equality"[257]? Let us take a closer look at this Efficacy Objection. According to Volacu and Dumitru, the reason why limitarian policies fail to establish political equality is that people can choose to spend income below the limitarian threshold in different ways. Take, for example, a democratic society in which no one has less than €100.000, in which everyone has precisely this amount of money, and in which it is impossible to have more than €100.000. Person A may prefer to spend her money on an expensive holiday, whereas person B may choose to spend it on influencing politics. If person B is not alone but operates as a member of a group of politically engaged peers, it is likely that political equality cannot be guaranteed by strong limitarianism. This is because in the end person B and her peers will have a much greater capacity to influence politics than person A. Volacu and Dumitru therefore argue that other institutional measures than strong limitarianism must be adopted to ensure political equality. But does the Efficacy Objection hold?

According to the Democratic Argument, political equality requires that nobody should have more or less political influence because of their (lack of) wealth.[258] The Efficacy Objection, then, holds that limitarian policies cannot prevent some people from having more or less political influence just because they are richer. However, limitarian policies need not do all the heavy lifting. They are a *partial* means to promote political equality. And so the Efficacy Objection, it seems to me, raises two questions: First,

[257] Volacu and Dumitru 2019, 257.

[258] This requirement does allow certain inequalities in political influence, for example because of efficiency gains or because some people just have better ideas than others. For discussion, see Christiano 2005.

are limitarian policies *effective* as a partial means to promote political equality? Second, are limitarian policies, even as a partial means, actually *needed* to establish political equality? In what follows, I will give four arguments as to why limitarian policies are both effective and needed. Such policies address issues which other policies cannot address, and they promote political equality at least partially.

First, financial capital, i.e. wealth, tends to attract nonfinancial capital, such as knowledge and opportunities ('social capital'), and behavioral norms and dispositions ('cultural capital').[259] The differences in access to nonfinancial capital that come with being a member of a specific social group translate into differences in the capacity to influence politics. Over time, this leads to what Halliday labels 'economic segregation', which "occurs when an individual's life prospects, and/or social status, depend on his or her group membership—specifically, membership of a group that possess greater wealth than other groups"[260]. Insofar as, for example, inheritance plays an important role in maintaining economic segregation over time, tackling inequalities which result from inheritance can tackle economic inequality. It is precisely these kinds of policies which policy limitarianism proposes. And insofar as the distribution of financial and nonfinancial capital is a proxy for the distribution of the capacity to influence politics, such policies promote political equality.

Second, people tend to be cognitively biased towards their own well-being, conception of the good and the role they play in their financial success.[261] There is insightful empirical evidence to support this claim. Research shows that people tend to have a self-serving bias, which is the tendency to perceive of themselves favorably. This self-serving bias

[259] Cf. Halliday 2018, 107.

[260] Halliday 2018, 1.

[261] Cf. Christiano 2008, 58–60; Halliday 2018, 113–17.

contributes to polarization on the views about predistribution and redistribution that people hold.[262] The highly unequal distribution of wealth in Western societies reinforces the impact of cognitive bias on political equality.[263] People are biased against seeing the illegitimacy of being rich and the political influence that comes with it, and the illegitimacy of others having much less of both.[264] This poses a problem for those caring about political equality. As Anderson puts it, the "self-serving bias is pervasive [but] has asymmetrical effects across social positions. It afflicts the powerful more than the powerless, and those with unaccountable power most of all. As Dewey observed: It is difficult for a person in a place of authoritative power to avoid supposing that what he wants is right as long as he has power to enforce his demand"[265]. Insofar as wealth is a proxy for political influence, one must care about riches not for the sake of reducing inequality but for the sake of equalizing political influence.

Third, what limitarian policies establish is that the opportunity costs for spending money on influencing politics are more equal for everyone, which furthers political equality. This holds even if limitarian policies do not rule out the possibility that some people are able or willing to spend more money on influencing politics than others, for example by pooling their resources. Limitarian policies cannot prevent some people from influencing politics on the grounds that they are richer, but in a society in which no-one or fewer people are excessively rich it is *more likely* that people will not have more influence just because they are richer. And, again, limitarian policies are a partial means that can supplement

[262] Cf. Deffains, Espinosa, and Thöni 2016.

[263] Cf. Alvaredo et al. 2018.

[264] I thank an anonymous reviewer of *Philosophia* for stressing this point.

[265] Anderson 2014, 7.

other institutional and constitutional changes to promote political equality.

Fourth, and finally, reducing inequalities in wealth leads to less discrepancies between the interests of people in society in certain domains of life. Limitarian policies protect people's interest in political equality by making people's interests more similar, such as their interest in a welfare state. Even if some people choose to spend more money on influencing politics than others, promoting their own interests will more likely entail furthering other's interests as well.[266]

6.5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have defended policy limitarianism as a non-ideal and partial view on how to instantiate and promote political equality. I have argued that policy limitarianism can disarm the Incentive Objection and the Efficacy Objection that Volacu and Dumitru raise against Robeyns' Democratic Argument for limitarianism. I have rejected the Incentive Objection on the grounds that there are different limitarian policies from the ones discussed by Volacu and Dumitru and which escape the problem of reduced productivity. I have rejected the Efficacy Objection because limitarian policies are a partial but highly valuable step towards establishing political equality, and that they can and should complement or be complemented by other strategies.

Much more needs to be said to spell out the implications of the policy limitarian view that I have developed in this paper, and to assess its normative foundation and empirical viability. The underlying aim of this paper, however, has been more modest, namely to show that policy limitarianism deserves more credit as a means to promote political equality

[266] An example of this would be a maximum wage that is linked to a specific wage ratio. For example, see Pizzigati 2018, chap. 2.

than may seem from Volacu and Dumitru's assessment of the Democratic Argument.

7 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined what thresholds are, what role they play in theories of distributive justice, and in which directions distributive views which deploy thresholds can be developed further. I have done so by proposing a general account of thresholds that shows the different elements that make up their conceptual core. Those elements are the level of the threshold, the moral value of that threshold, and its allocative principles. Such an account of thresholds in distributive justice is crucial for three reasons: it helps understand and characterize threshold views in distributive justice; it can subsume what may seem to be different debates under one conceptual header; and it can be used to further examine and develop patterns of justice that draw on thresholds.

In light of this account, I have proposed a novel characterization of sufficientarianism which sheds new light on the distinctiveness of sufficientarianism as a distributive principle and on the common objections to sufficientarianism. Moreover, I have examined and defended limitarianism, which is the view that people should not have more than a certain amount of wealth. In particular, I have argued in favour of limitarianism as a midlevel principle for guiding institutional design and individual actions and, furthermore, as a specification of what a just allocation of wealth requires under epistemic constraints.

Yet there are other distinctive and valuable contributions to be made in philosophical theorizing about justice by focussing on thresholds. In closing, I want to highlight three potential contributions of this research project and its relevance for future debates that go beyond the arguments in this thesis.

The first contribution concerns a shift in the focus of philosophical debates about distributive patterns and distributive justice more generally. According to my reading of the literature that deals with such debates,

most debates deal with the *content* of distribute patterns. In other words, the debates are about what egalitarians, prioritarians, and sufficientarians believe or should believe. An example of such a debate is the sufficientarian debate about whether sufficientarians should endorse the negative thesis and, in doing so, reject distributive criteria above some threshold. Another example is some of the canonical texts that try to identify and characterize the core commitments of various distributive patterns, such as Derek Parfit's "Equality or Priority", Paula Casal's "Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough", and Martin O'Neill's "What Should Egalitarians Believe?"[267] Each of those papers identifies a set of core commitments that render a view that is distinctive from its rivals and plausible on its own.

In a way, this thesis fits squarely in this existing literature. It too is concerned, ultimately, with what proponents of specific distributive patterns must believe. And it uses the same philosophical and analytical tools to examine this issue. However, instead of facing the question of what egalitarians, prioritarians, and sufficientarians must believe head-on, I have focussed primarily on the conceptual structure around which those beliefs are structured. Rather than saying that egalitarianism, prioritarianism, and sufficientarianism are *different distributive patterns*, I have tried to explore them as *different specifications of a single conceptual structure*. Hence, I have examined what renders each of those specific views distinctive by focussing on what they have in common.

The value of this approach is that it opens up new avenues to examine longstanding debates. I have argued for something along those lines in my recharacterization of sufficientarianism, which replaces the traditional sufficientarian theses with what I have labelled the three claims of sufficientarianism. Another example of this is the different ways in which problems about the arbitrariness of thresholds arise for different

[267] Cf. Parfit 1997; Casal 2007; M. O'Neill 2008.

threshold views and how defenders of thresholds can respond to such views. Hence, if the analysis in this thesis proves valuable for ongoing theorizing about distributive justice, this is at least in part because of its focus on the conceptual structure of distributive patterns rather than the content of those patterns.

This brings us to the second contribution. As I read the literature on distributive justice, there is an increasing move towards more eclectic and hybrid patterns of distributive justice which combine concerns for equality, priority, sufficiency, and other principles.[268] In my view, such hybrid and eclectic theorizing about distributive justice offers a promising starting point for specifying and examining what distributive justice requires. What I mean by this is that distributive patterns should not be *either* egalitarian *or* prioritarian *or* sufficientarian but should combine many different concerns. The analysis of the concept of threshold views is a powerful tool in such theorizing. The difference between different types of threshold views, as far as their conceptual structure is concerned, is first and foremost a difference in how they specify the elements of the concept of a threshold.[269] Whatever concerns for equality, priority, and sufficiency are combined in such views, they all share that common conceptual structure. That structure, then, can serve as the starting point for all distributive patterns that aim to be eclectic and hybrid and accept that thresholds should play a role in how valuable goods are distributed and made available to people.

The third contribution concerns the concept of thresholds in philosophy more generally. Thresholds play a key role outside distributive justice as well. They are deployed in debates about individual and collective

[268] E.g. Roemer 2004; Shields 2020, sec. 4.

[269] As threshold views, they may also differ regarding how many continua they endorse. See §2.2.

action, responsibility, and moral duties.[270] For instance, so-called threshold deontologists argue that a deontic constraint may be overridden for the sake of furthering good outcomes or avoiding bad ones if enough good or bad is at stake.[271] Subsequently, both ethicists and political philosophers have drawn on thresholds when conceptualizing the boundaries of the moral community by saying that if some being is to have moral status, a threshold level of certain capacities or interests is required.[272] Moreover, thresholds are defended outside normative philosophy as well. In epistemology, fallibilism is the epistemological thesis that beliefs cannot be supported or justified in a conclusive way. Though this view is widely supported, it raises the question of what fixes the threshold of justification for knowledge – what is at stake, then, is how much non-conclusive support or justification for a belief is necessary for knowledge.[273] This is a question about what threshold for knowledge fallibilist theories should support.

Showing that there is one unifying account of thresholds that unites the more specific usages of thresholds in all those different debates is far beyond what I can hope to establish here. But in my view, such a unifying account is probably possible and would be a valuable contribution to current debates. It seems possible because even if we lack a unifying account of thresholds in philosophy, we can still see that thresholds raise similar objections everywhere they are deployed. For instance, almost anywhere

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[270] Cf. Singer 1980, 335; Almassi 2011; Alexander 2000; Zamir and Medina 2010, 46.

[271] Cf. Zamir and Medina 2010, 46.

[272] Savulescu 2009, 237–38; Wikler 2009, 346; McMahan 2009, 601–2; Wilson 2007; Williams 2008, 148; Buchanan 2009.

[273] See Hetherington 2006; Bonjour 2011; Rothschild and Spectre 2018; Lee 2017; Hannon 2017.

that thresholds are deployed, objections about their arbitrariness arise.[274] I take it that this is because in each of those different debates, thresholds specify one specific level on a continuum as the threshold level. What exactly this continuum of levels represents differs in each of those contexts, e.g. levels of goods, levels of harm, levels of cognitive capacities, and so forth. Yet the fact that there is a shared *objection* to thresholds in many different philosophical debates suggests that it is possible to find a common *conceptual structure* of such thresholds.

Moreover, such a single, unifying account of thresholds that unites the more specific usages of thresholds in all these different debates is valuable for reasons that are similar to the reasons why such an account of thresholds in distributive justice is valuable. It helps understand and characterize threshold views in such debates, it can subsume what may seem to be different debates under one conceptual header, and it can be used to further examine and develop such threshold views. For example, proponents of threshold views in distributive justice might draw support and inspiration from proponents of different types of thresholds in philosophical theorizing, and the same could be the case the other way around.

Hence, I believe that there is great value in exploring the possibility of a single, unifying account of thresholds in philosophical theorizing. Here, however, I have aimed to develop a theory of distributive thresholds specifically and to illuminate the dynamics and functions of thresholds and limits in philosophical theorizing about distributive justice. In doing all this, I hope to have made more plausible the Shakespearean motto that Paula Casal started her famous paper on sufficientarianism with, namely that "distributions should undo excess | And each man have enough".[275] That is, I hope that I have shown that sufficientarianism and limitarianism

[274] E.g. Ellis 1992, 860; Alexander 2000; Ebert 2018.

[275] Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 4.1.66.

provide distinctive and important insights into how valuable goods must be distributed and made available to everyone.

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Samenvatting in het Nederlands

In augustus 2020 werd Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos de eerste persoon in de geschiedenis met een vermogen van meer dan $200 miljard. In datzelfde jaar groeide het vermogen van de rijkste 500 mensen op aarde met $1.8 biljoen tot $7.6 biljoen (1 biljoen = 1000 miljard). Om iets van grip te krijgen op deze cijfers: $200 miljard is meer geld dan jij zou hebben wanneer je $250.000 per dag had verdiend sinds de dag dat Jezus geboren werd. Tegelijkertijd leefden volgens de Wereldbank in 2015 ongeveer 689 miljoen mensen in extreme armoede. Dat aantal kan door de coronacrisis, regionale conflicten en klimaatverandering de komende jaren volgens de Wereldbank met wel 150 miljoen mensen stijgen.

Deze cijfers vragen om actie. Maar ze vragen ook om reflectie – bijvoorbeeld op het feit dat extreme rijkdom en extreme armoede naast elkaar bestaan. Een van de doelen van politieke filosofie is om die reflectie te bieden. Dat armoede een moreel probleem is, is iets dat door veel mensen onderschreven wordt. Maar zou rijkdom ook een moreel probleem kunnen zijn? Hebben de superrijken specifieke plichten om de wereld rechtvaardiger te maken, bijvoorbeeld door zich in te zetten om armoede te bestrijden? En wat is de rol van overheden en het bedrijfsleven in het voorkomen van armoede en – misschien ook wel – het voorkomen van extreme rijkdom?

Om antwoord te geven op deze vragen moeten we weten wat een rechtvaardige verdeling van rijkdom en andere schaarse middelen precies vereist. Dit proefschrift vertrekt vanuit de overtuiging dat het concept van een *grens* daarin cruciaal is. Dat kan bijvoorbeeld een armoedegrens zijn waaronder mensen niet genoeg hebben om in hun basale behoeften te voorzien of een rijkdomsgrens waarboven ze meer geld hebben dan moreel te rechtvaardigen is. In dit proefschrift focus ik daarom op de rol die

grenzen spelen in het beschrijven van hoe een rechtvaardige verdeling van schaarse middelen eruitziet.

Dergelijke grenzen spelen een prominente rol in het politiek-filosofische debat over 'verdelende rechtvaardigheid', waar het vraagstuk naar hoe schaarse middelen moeten worden verdeeld ook toe behoort. Toch is er ondanks die prominente rol tot dusver weinig filosofisch onderzoek gedaan naar wat zo'n grens precies is. In dit proefschrift ontwikkel ik daarom een algemene theorie over grenzen in theorieën van verdelende rechtvaardigheid. Zo probeer ik licht te werpen op de vraag hoe we vanuit het oogpunt van rechtvaardigheid kunnen en moeten nadenken over extreme rijkdom en extreme armoede.

Een filosofisch onderzoek naar grenzen in theorieën van verdelende rechtvaardigheid is om drie redenen waardevol. Allereerst laat het zien welke rol grenzen precies spelen in dergelijke theorieën. Daarnaast biedt het mogelijkheden voor kruisbestuivingen tussen verschillende debatten over grenzen in verdelende rechtvaardigheid. Voorstanders van een armoedegrens staan bijvoorbeeld voor een vergelijkbare uitdaging als voorstanders van een rijkdomsgrens in het verdedigen waarom hun grens niet iets lager of iets hoger zou moeten zijn. Tenslotte laat dit onderzoek zien welke vraagstukken en mogelijkheden tot dusver zijn blijven liggen in het politiek-filosofische debat over grenzen in theorieën van verdelende rechtvaardigheid.

De inhoudelijke hoofdstukken van dit proefschrift, hoofdstukken 2-6, bestaan uit vijf verschillende artikelen. In het tweede hoofdstuk, getiteld 'Thresholds in Distributive Justice', laat ik zien hoe we in abstracte termen kunnen nadenken over de rol die het concept van een 'grens' speelt in het verdedigen van bijvoorbeeld een armoedegrens of rijkdomsgrens. Ik argumenteer dat zo'n grens uit drie bouwstenen bestaat, namelijk de hoogte van die grens, of die grens instrumenteel of intrinsiek waardevol is, en hoe schaarse middelen boven en onder de grens verdeeld moeten

worden. Met deze drie bouwstenen kan elke mogelijke functie van een grens in een theorie van verdelende rechtvaardigheid worden beschreven. Aan de hand van deze analyse argumenteer ik dat een bekend bezwaar tegen grenzen, namelijk dat theorieën die gebruikmaken van grenzen altijd voorrang geven aan het zorgen dat zoveel mogelijk mensen boven of juist onder de grens uitkomen, berust op een misverstand. Hoewel veel van zulke theorieën inderdaad stellen dat er tenminste één reden is om dit waardevol te vinden, hoeven die theorieën niet te zeggen dat dit de *enige* of *belangrijkste* reden is. Daarnaast argumenteer ik dat het veelgehoorde bezwaar tegen de zogenaamde willekeurigheid van de hoogte van grenzen – bijvoorbeeld een armoedegrens of rijkdomsgrens – geen reden is om theorieën die gebruikmaken van grenzen te verwerpen. In plaats van ons af te vragen of de hoogte van een grens arbitrair is, kunnen we ons beter afvragen of we goede redenen hebben om zo'n grens te verdedigen zelfs wanneer de ideale hoogte ervan niet exact te bepalen is.

In het derde hoofdstuk, getiteld 'Justice, Thresholds, and the Three Claims of Sufficientarianism', bespreek ik een theorie van verdelende rechtvaardigheid die 'sufficiëntarisme' wordt genoemd. Deze theorie zegt dat een rechtvaardige verdeling van schaarse middelen vereist dat iedereen tenminste een minimale hoeveelheid van die middelen heeft. Zowel in het publieke debat als in de politieke filosofie is sufficiëntarisme een veelbesproken en vaak verdedigde theorie. In de politieke filosofie wordt sufficiëntarisme vaak gedefinieerd als het idee dat het belangrijk is dat iedereen genoeg heeft en dat wanneer dat zo is ongelijkheid minder of zelfs niets uitmaakt. Maar deze definitie heeft twee problemen: het maakt onvoldoende duidelijk waarin sufficiëntarisme precies overeenkomt met en verschilt van alternatieve theorieën van verdelende rechtvaardigheid en het maakt sufficiëntarisme kwetsbaar voor veelgehoorde bezwaren. Ik argumenteer daarom dat deze theorie beter anders kan worden gedefinieerd, namelijk aan de hand van wat ik de drie claims van sufficiëntarisme noem.

Sufficiëntarisme zegt dan dat in de verdeling van schaarse middelen voorrang moet worden gegeven aan mensen beneden een bepaalde grens, bijvoorbeeld een armoedegrens of een andere levensstandaard.

Deze definitie helpt sufficiëntarisme beter te vergelijken en contrasteren met andere theorieën van verdelende rechtvaardigheid. Belangrijker nog, het laat zien hoe verschillende veelgehoorde bezwaren tegen sufficientarisme kunnen worden weerlegd. Veel van die bezwaren zeggen bijvoorbeeld op een of andere manier dat sufficiëntarisme het belang van voorrang geven aan mensen beneden de grens overdrijft. Maar als we goed kijken, gaat dit bezwaar over de specifieke nadruk die sufficiëntarisme legt op 'voorrang geven' en níet zozeer op het accepteren van een minimale grens. Omdat ook veel alternatieven voor sufficiëntarisme voorrang geven aan sommige mensen in plaats van anderen, zelfs wanneer zij geen gebruikmaken van grenzen, zijn ook die alternatieve theorieën kwetsbaar voor dergelijke bezwaren. Interessant genoeg wordt in de literatuur vaak alleen sufficiëntarisme als kwetsbaar bestempeld. Door te leren van hoe alternatieve theorieën niet vatbaar lijken voor kritiek op het geven van voorrang aan sommige mensen in plaats van anderen, probeer ik sufficientarisme zo sterk mogelijk te maken.

De overige drie inhoudelijke hoofdstukken van dit proefschrift gaan over 'limitarisme' en de vraag of mensen teveel rijkdom kunnen bezitten. Volgens limitarisme hebben mensen teveel rijkdom wanneer zij een bepaalde rijkdomsgrens overstijgen. Rijkdom boven dat punt zou bijvoorbeeld herverdeeld kunnen worden om politieke en sociale gelijkheid te beschermen en om anderen in hun urgente behoeften naar schaarse middelen te voorzien.

In het vierde hoofdstuk, getiteld 'Limitarianism: Pattern, Principle, or Presumption?', laat ik zien wat voor soort theorie van verdelende rechtvaardigheid limitarisme precies is. Dit is belangrijk omdat het voor de onderbouwing van een rijkdomsgrens veel uitmaakt waarom we deze precies

zouden accepteren. Ik argumenteer dat limitarisme in ieder geval niet overtuigend is als theorie over hoe rijkdom in een ideale samenleving verdeeld zou moeten worden. Maar op twee andere manieren is limitarisme wél overtuigend. Ten eerste kan limitarisme worden gezien als een principe dat onder bepaalde omstandigheden specifiek maakt wat meer fundamentele, abstracte morele principes vereisen. Limitarisme zegt dan dat onder die specifieke omstandigheden er een grens of maximum aan individuele rijkdom moet komen, bijvoorbeeld wanneer miljoenen mensen in extreme armoede leven terwijl enkele miljardairs hun rijkdom zien vermenigvuldigen. Ik argumenteer bijvoorbeeld dat veel morele principes de huidige ongelijke verdeling van rijkdom problematisch vinden, en dat daarom die principes een rijkdomsgrens kunnen ondersteunen.

Daarnaast kan limitarisme worden verdedigd als een voorzorgsprincipe dat rijkdom verdeelt op een manier die het meest waarschijnlijk rechtvaardig is. Soms weten we niet precies hoeveel mensen moreel gezien verdienen te bezitten, bijvoorbeeld omdat we niet precies weten hoe getalenteerd zij zijn, hoe hard ze werken, welke tegenslagen ze hebben gekend, of door hoeveel toeval ze hun vermogen hebben vergaard. In die gevallen is de verdeling van rijkdom die het meest waarschijnlijk rechtvaardig is er een is waarin mensen niet meer hebben dan een bepaalde maximumgrens. De kans dat zo'n limiet tot een onrechtvaardige verdeling van rijkdom leidt, is kleiner dan de kans dat zo'n rijkdomsgrens een rechtvaardige verdeling bewerkstelligt. Dit argument kan dus worden gebruikt om limitarisme te verdedigen.

In het vijfde hoofdstuk, getiteld 'How Much Is Too Much? Political Equality, Urgent Needs, and the Fully Flourishing Life', ga ik dieper in op de specifieke vorm van limitarisme die Ingrid Robeyns verdedigt. Zij argumenteert dat mensen niet meer rijkdom zouden moeten hebben dan nodig is om een florerend leven te kunnen leiden. Dit is omdat extreme rijkdom een gevaar vormt voor politieke gelijkheid en omdat het

herverdelen van die rijkdom het mogelijk maakt andere mensen in hun urgente behoeften te voorzien. Maar de vraag is waarom nu juist de grens waarboven mensen een florerend leven kunnen leiden de relevante rijkdomsgrens is. Wellicht dat een andere rijkdomsgrens beter politieke gelijkheid garandeert en/of mensen in hun urgente behoeften kan voorzien. In antwoord hierop argumenteer ik dat het sterkste argument voor limitarisme zegt dat een rijkdomsgrens op twee verschillende gronden gerechtvaardigd moet worden. De eerste is dat deze rijkdomsgrens belangrijke waarden zoals politieke gelijkheid en het beschermen van de belangen van de minstbedeelden bevordert. De tweede is dat deze rijkdomsgrens kan rekenen op politieke en maatschappelijke steun, bijvoorbeeld omdat deze resoneert met hoe in het publieke debat over de waarde van rijkdom gedacht wordt. Soms duwen deze twee gronden in tegengestelde richting. Zo kan een politieke en maatschappelijk acceptabele rijkdomsgrens hoger of lager zijn dan de rijkdomsgrens die de relevante waarden het meest bevordert. Maar het is juist de combinatie van deze twee gronden die limitarisme in potentie een belangrijke theorie maakt over hoe rijkdom rechtvaardig verdeeld kan worden.

In het zesde hoofdstuk, getiteld ‘Defending the Democratic Argument for Limitarianism: A Reply to Volacu and Dumitru’, reageer ik op twee bezwaren tegen limitarisme die zijn opgeworpen door Alexandru Volacu en Adelin Costin Dumitru. Het eerste bezwaar is dat een rijkdomsgrens een inefficiënte manier is om belangrijke waarden, zoals het bestrijden van armoede of het beschermen van politieke gelijkheid, te bevorderen. Dit is omdat mensen geen financiële prikkel hebben om nog langer productief te zijn op het moment dat ze die rijkdomsgrens overschrijden. Misschien zouden we daarom zonder rijkdomsgrens wel veel méér mensen in hun urgente behoeften kunnen voorzien. Het tweede bezwaar is dat een rijkdomsgrens niet effectief is omdat de waarden die deze probeert te beschermen ook mét zo’n rijkdomsgrens ondermijnd kunnen worden. Als

antwoord op deze twee bezwaren argumenteer ik dat voorstanders van limitarisme uit verschillende meer specifieke voorstellen voor een rijkdomsgrens kunnen kiezen. Die specifieke voorstellen kunnen bezwaren over efficiëntie en effectiviteit meewegen. Daarnaast argumenteer ik dat een rijkdomsgrens altijd een specifiek onderdeel is van een cluster aan principes en maatregelen en dus in combinatie met andere voorstellen moet worden verdedigd.

Mijn hoop is dat deze hoofdstukken gezamenlijk bijdragen aan de filosofische reflectie op extreme armoede, extreme rijkdom, en andere vraagstukken over verdelende rechtvaardigheid waarin grenzen een prominente rol spelen.

Curriculum Vitae

Dick Timmer (1993) received his Bachelor's degrees in philosophy (2015) and religious studies (2015, *cum laude*) and his Master's degree in philosophy (2017, *cum laude*) from Utrecht University. He studied philosophy and theology as a visiting student at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Protestant Theological University. He wrote his PhD thesis as a member of the ERC Fair Limits project at the Ethics Institute, Utrecht University (2017-2021). His thesis was supervised by prof. dr. Ingrid Robeyns, dr. Sem de Maagt, and dr. Tim Meijers. He has published in journals such as the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, and *Utilitas*. He is an editor of the popular Dutch philosophy blog *Bij Nader Inzien*.

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