The Doctrine of Sufficiency: A Defence

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This article proposes an analysis of the doctrine of sufficiency. According to my reading, the doctrine's basic positive claim is 'prioritarian': benefiting x is of special moral importance where (and only where) x is badly off. Its negative claim is anti-egalitarian: *most* comparative facts expressed by statements of the type 'x is worse off than y' have no moral significance at all. This contradicts the 'classical' priority view according to which, although equality *per se* does not matter, whenever x is worse off than y, at least some priority should be assigned to helping x. Section I elaborates and defends this reconstruction of the doctrine of sufficiency, and section II shows that the privileged utility level presumed within the sufficiency framework exists.

This article offers an interpretation of the doctrine of sufficiency.[1] The doctrine was articulated by Harry Frankfurt as a rival to egalitarianism:

> what is important from the point of view of morality is not that everyone should have the same, but that each should have enough. If everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether one had more than others.[2]

Since Frankfurt's goal is mainly critical, his positive case for sufficiency is incomplete; he does not develop the basic idea expressed in the above quoted passage into a definite ethics of distribution.[3] Indeed,

[1] For a clear statement, see Harry Frankfurt, 'Equality as a Moral Ideal', reprinted in his *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge, 1988); Martha Nussbaum, 'Aristotelian Social Democracy', *Liberalism and the Good*, ed. R. Bruce Douglas, G. M. Mara and H. S. Richardson (New York, 1990); Nussbaum, 'Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism', *Political Theory* 20 (1992); Elisabeth Anderson, 'What is the Point of Equality', *Ethics* 109 (1999).

[2] Frankfurt, 'Equality as a Moral Ideal', p. 134.

[3] In defining the subject matter of the 'ethics of distribution', I follow Derek Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?,' The Lindley Lecture (University of Kansas, 1995). He presents the procedure for deciding among rival ethical theories of distribution thus: '[we] consider different possible states of affairs, or outcomes, each involving the same set of people. We imagine that we know how well off, in these outcomes, these people would be. We then ask whether either outcome would be better, or would be the outcome that we ought to bring about' (ibid., p. 2). I also follow Parfit in presupposing that, at least in some cases, '[n]o one deserves to be better off than anyone else; nor does any one have entitlements' (ibid.). This assumption makes Nozick's theory of entitlement (as well as theories of desert and merit) irrelevant to the limited subject of the ethics of distribution. The questions that ethical theories of distribution address can be based on two assumptions: 'First, some people may be worse off than others. Second, these differences can be matters of degree' (ibid.). Thus, formulating these questions does not imply any elaborated theory about the factors that determine how well people fare.

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the doctrine might be developed into a variety of moral principles. And as it stands, it does not have a canonical interpretation.

Some critics of the sufficiency doctrine take it to be an ethics of distribution whose only concern is to move as many individuals as possible just past a certain threshold – in other words, to minimize the number of people who are poor/badly off/not well off, etc. But so understood, the theory is obviously unacceptable. It implies that, given that two persons cannot be moved above the 'good enough level', it does not matter if one dies a painful death at age ten, whereas the other dies a quick, painless death at age twenty.[4] This is, of course, a non-charitable interpretation of the doctrine. Supporters and critics alike advance more charitable interpretations. A recent attempt is this: we should assign priority to helping an individual 'the further she now is from the threshold level'.[5] With regard to individuals who are above this level, the straight utilitarian policy should prevail. I shall reject both interpretations.

As I read it, the doctrine's positive claim embraces what might be called the Basic Intuition.

The Basic Intuition: (at least some) priority should be given to helping people who are badly off.

Hence, minimizing the number of people who are badly off is only derivatively important. The 'good-enough level' functions as a priority line: benefiting people who are below this line should take (at least some) priority over benefiting other people who are above it. The critique based on the non-charitable interpretation misfires. The fact that the person who is badly off cannot be moved past the good-enough level does not undermine her moral claim.

The doctrine makes a negative claim as well; it denies the 'egalitarian conditional'.

The egalitarian conditional: in a world of two, *whenever* x is worse off than y, benefiting x should take at least some priority over benefiting y.

In contrast to the egalitarian conditional, 'sufficientarians' believe that many comparative facts do not have either intrinsic or derivative significance. Note how strong this claim is. Not only those who attach intrinsic value to equality accept the egalitarian conditional. The conditional is true, even within Parfit's version of the 'priority view'. According to this view, benefiting people matters more the worse off

[4] Richard Arneson, 'Luck-Egalitarianism and Prioritarianism', *Ethics* 110 (2000), p. 347; Arneson, 'Perfectionism and Politics', *Ethics* 111 (2000), p. 57. Cf. his 'Why Justice Requires Transfers to Offset Income and Wealth Inequalities', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 19 (2002).

[5] Arneson, 'Perfectionism', p. 57.

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these people are, so equality and how one person's situation compares to another do not matter *per se*. Still, in such a view *every* comparative fact has *derived* significance. In my interpretation, the doctrine of sufficiency implies that most comparative facts have *no* significance altogether. Furthermore, properly understood, the doctrine of sufficiency rejects a weaker version of the egalitarian conditional as well.

The semi-egalitarian conditional: in a world of two, if x and y are below the good-enough threshold and x is worse off than y, benefiting x should take at least some priority over benefiting y.

Since the semi-egalitarian conditional is rejected, the more charitable interpretation mentioned above also fails.

Putting together the negative and the positive claims, what sufficientarians are getting at seems to be the following: benefiting a person is of special moral importance only if she is badly off. When the distribution in question is among people who are on the same side of a priority line, the purely utilitarian solution of the distributive dilemma should prevail. In this article, I aim to elaborate, modify, and eventually defend this version of the sufficiency doctrine.

Some terminological stipulations: I call ethical theories of distribution that respect the Basic Intuition the 'priority views'. I shall characterize theories that embrace the egalitarian conditional 'egalitarian'. To prevent potential confusion, I must emphasize (once again) that priority views are at most derivatively egalitarian; they do not attach intrinsic value to equality. I therefore call the Parfit construal of the priority view the derivatively egalitarian priority view, or, for short, 'the DE-priority view'. Now, the doctrine of sufficiency, as I suggest interpreting it, is *anti-egalitarian* in the sense that it rejects the egalitarian conditional altogether. Hence I call my reconstruction of the doctrine of sufficiency, 'the AE-priority view'.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section I shall distinguish between two incompatible views within which the Basic Intuition might be explained, the DE-priority view and the AE-priority view. I shall identify the latter with the doctrine of sufficiency, and then show that it is preferable to the DE-priority view. In the second section I shall delineate and address the main challenge faced by the doctrine of sufficiency.

I. TWO VERSIONS OF THE PRIORITY VIEW

A. Explaining the Basic Intuition through the derivatively egalitarian priority view

Parfit presents an attractive theoretical framework within which the Basic Intuition might be naturally explained. He starts by observing

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that 'Some apply [the Basic Intuition] only to the two groups of the well off and the badly off'. There is, though, 'a more general version of this view, which can be applied to everyone'. The 'more general version', of which the Basic Intuition is only a salient example, could be put thus:

The weighted priority view: benefiting people matters more the worse off those people are, the more of those people there are, and the greater the benefits in question.[6]

'Worse off' here means worse off in absolute terms. It is assumed that we have a cardinal scale that measures a person's condition. It is also assumed that the scale yields interpersonal comparability. The lower the person's rating on this scale, the greater the moral value of securing benefit for her. In addition, the priority view holds that it is morally more valuable to achieve benefit for someone, the greater the size of the benefit (that is, the prioritarian prefers more utility to less). The ethical imperative derived from these principles is that one ought to do what maximizes moral value so construed. Thus understood, the priority view picks a family of principles, depending on the relative weight that is assigned to gaining more utility compared to securing gains for the worse off. At one extreme, the priority view approaches pure utilitarianism, at the other extreme, priority approaches Rawls's maximin principle (whose close relation to the priority view is noted by Parfit and McKerlie).[7]

Historically, the Basic Intuition was embedded in a different theoretical framework, namely: egalitarianism.

Egalitarianism: one outcome is to be prima facie preferred to another in so far as (undeserved) inequality is minimized.[8]

Yet, as an explanation of the Basic Intuition, the priority view has an obvious advantage. The crucial difference between egalitarianism and the priority view is the immunity of the latter to the so-called 'levelling down objection'. Prioritarians believe that in a world populated by blind and sighted people, blinding the sighted is a wrongdoing, with no desirable feature, even if equality is achieved. Those who adopt the above definition for egalitarianism believe that blinding the sighted is merely all-things-considered wrong – i.e. it does have a moral reason, which is outweighed by the morally significant fact that achieving equality in this way involves a grave loss of utility. Needless to say, a theory that is immune to the levelling down objection better explains the Basic Intuition. The priority view has a further advantage. It

[6] See Roger Crisp, 'Equality, Priority and Compassion', *Ethics* 113 (2003), p. 752.
[7] Dennis McKerlie, 'Equality and Priority', *Utilitas* 6 (1994), pp. 29–34; Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?', pp. 35–9.
[8] This is how Roger Crisp puts it in his 'Equality, Priority and Compassion', p. 746.

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passes, while egalitarianism fails, the isolation test: benefiting people would be as important even if no one else existed. 'Benefits to the worse off matter more, but that is only because these people are at a lower absolute level'.[9] Again, the Basic Intuition seems to be better explained by a view that passes the isolation test.

Having pointed out the non-egalitarian aspect of the priority view (its immunity to the levelling down objection), Parfit observes that it still has a 'built-in bias towards equality'[10] such that his construal is justly named 'non-relational egalitarianism'.[11] In the same spirit, Richard Arneson characterizes his version of prioritarianism as 'a close cousin of . . . egalitarianism'.[12] To see why this characterization is adequate, compare the following three situations:

(i) all at 50
(ii) first half at 50, second half at 100
(iii) all at 75

The priority view posits that (ii) is better than (i), despite the equality in the latter – at this point, the priority view differs from pure egalitarianism. The 'built-in bias towards equality' comes to the surface in ranking (iii) as the best state of affairs. It is better than (ii), since the importance of benefiting the first half (which is at 50 in (ii)) with additional 25 utility units, is greater than benefiting the second half (which is at 75) with the same amount of utility.[13] It follows that, although the prioritarians see nothing inherently bad in social, economic or other differences, they construct a view whose bias towards equality is inherent. In other words, they adopt the egalitarian conditional: if x is worse off than y, there is a prima facie reason for benefiting x rather than y. Parfit's construal of the priority is thus a derivatively egalitarian priority view.

B. Rejecting the DE-Priority view by falsifying the egalitarian conditional

As the Frankfurt statement clearly suggests, the doctrine of sufficiency involves a denial of the Parfit version of the priority view. To repeat, Frankfurt says that 'if everyone had enough, it would be of no moral consequence whether one had more than others'. This indicates that, above the good enough level, no priority is to be assigned to benefiting x over benefiting y, even if x is worse off than y.

[9] Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?', p. 23.
[10] Ibid., p. 25.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Arneson, 'Luck-Egalitarianism', p. 341.
[13] This bias might even be stronger: a DE-prioritarian might advocate choosing (iv) – all at 70 – rather than (ii).

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The structure of the sufficientarian argument against the priority view as construed by Parfit should thus be simple. The DE-priority view implies the egalitarian conditional. But the egalitarian conditional is false, hence, the DE-priority view is false. The counterexample can be extracted from Frankfurt's above-quoted remark. Clearly, at least in some cases in which both x and y are well off, the mere fact that x is worse off than y does not constitute a reason for benefiting x. Think of Bill Gates and Warren Buffet, and suppose that they are extremely well off. Would the fact that Buffet is much less well off than Gates be a reason to prefer benefiting Buffet to benefiting Gates? I find it utterly implausible to suppose that any priority at all should be assigned to helping a worse off person rather than a better off one when both persons are extremely well off.

Some prioritarians would not be embarrassed. They would argue that the Buffet/Gates example is to be explained as follows. In accordance with the egalitarian conditional, benefiting Buffet is morally more important than benefiting Gates. Yet, the importance of the benefits under discussion is so marginal – the importance of benefiting Buffet as well as benefiting Gates is utterly infinitesimal – that the moral difference between them is almost invisible. But this is the wrong diagnosis: since Buffet fares so well, we are not at all interested in weighing the value of benefiting him. That is, intuitively, no priority is to be given to helping a person at this utility level. The same is true of Gates. Hence, priority-based comparisons seem irrelevant rather than invisible in this case.

Here is a different prioritarian response to the sufficientarian counterexample. Despite the fact that the Buffet/Gates case is told in terms of well-being, it trades on intuitions about money being a trivial benefit for the very rich. Consider (the objection goes) another kind of case. Suppose that we can provide a life-saving treatment for either of two people – Jones or Smith – who have both led (equally) long and happy lives (and will both be above the sufficiency threshold whatever we do). Suppose also that we can either give one person another ten happy years or both five happy years. It seems that if we give one person ten extra years, the other person could reasonably complain that this is unfair; why should he have to die when both could have another five years? Our intuitions, the prioritarian would argue, speak in favour of the priority view.

Now, there is some truth in this response to the Gates/Buffet story. Yet, I do not believe that it takes advantage of the diminishing utility of money. Rather, this story exemplifies the moral insignificance of *luxuries*. And this is exactly what the sufficientarian is after. Luxuries might improve one's condition to a very large extent, so the objector's diagnosis for the intuitive appeal of the Gates/Buffet example fails.

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Indeed, it seems obvious that, with regard to the distribution of luxuries, the type of priority we assign to the badly off does not exist. On the other hand, be one's conception of the good life as it may, it would be odd to consider an extra bit of good life as a luxury. Quite to the contrary, however good their life has been, the fact that Jones and Smith are both in need of a life-saving drug makes them badly off *now*. In other words, the Jones/Smith example trades on the time sensitivity of the Basic Intuition. Generally, accounting for the time sensitivity of any ethics of distribution is very difficult. It is clear, however, that priority is to be assigned to saving a person's life, or relieving the awful pains he suffers, even if he is generally very well off. I shall return to this theme below. (Note further that the Smith/Jones story involves a different, unrelated, issue. If the distributor has no reason to prefer Smith to Jones or vice versa, it would be arbitrary and disrespectful to do so. Impartiality requires equal treatment in such a case.)

C. The Basic Intuition and the Doctrine of Sufficiency

(a) The sufficientarian notion of the good life

The Buffet/Gates counterexample is by no means conclusive. In fact, later on I shall argue that one's approach to such an example depends on one's more theoretical convictions. Still, in light of this example, it is worth looking for other explanations of the Basic Intuition. For Parfit, the lower a person's utility in absolute terms, the greater the moral value of achieving a benefit of a given size for him. Frankfurt, on the other hand, claims that one's claim is important because his condition is *bad* – he is poor, needy, etc.[14] The prioritarian generalization of the Basic Intuition is misguided. Benefits to people are of special moral importance only if these people are badly off. This sufficientarian conviction, I propose, stems from a different way of conceptualizing the well-being space. This conceptualization is inspired by the qualitative difference between pain and pleasure. Our leading analogy is this: pains may be ordered according to their intensity; mental experience may be more or less painful. The same is true of pleasures. It goes without saying, however, that the scales with which we represent the intensity of pains or pleasures cannot represent the difference between pain and pleasure. Patently, the mental experience of pain is not only a lack of pleasure. This difference is the factual basis for negative utilitarianism: 'there is, from an ethical standpoint, no symmetry

[14] Frankfurt, 'Equality as a Moral Ideal', p. 151.

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between suffering and happiness'.[15] Or as Petrarch famously remarks, 'a thousand pleasures are not worth one pain'.[16]

In the doctrine of sufficiency, the asymmetry between pain and pleasure is replaced. It is especially important to eliminate one's pains, only if one becomes badly off because of them. Indeed, people who do not suffer any pain might be badly off, and, vice versa, those who suffer pains are not necessarily badly off, even at the time of the painful experience. The negative utilitarianism asymmetry should, therefore, be replaced by the asymmetry between bad and good lives: people might fare better or worse, but there is a threshold below which their life is coloured as bad life. In other words, like those who hold the Parfitian priority view, sufficientarians are committed to a cardinal scale that measures a person's condition, which yields interpersonal comparability. But their doctrine has a further commitment. By analogy with the structure of the 'hedonic space', sufficientarians claim that there is a morally privileged utility threshold such that only regarding people below this threshold are the priority considerations relevant. Benefiting someone whose life is bad matters more than benefiting someone else whose life is not bad. The plausibility of such a view depends on identifying a morally privileged utility level as the good-enough level, and making a case that this level has great moral importance.

Perhaps it would be useful to mention again the complication I already described through the Jones/Smith example. It is more important to relieve the severe pain of someone (who is badly off at the time of the pain), even if his life as a whole is good, than it is to give a tiny pleasure to someone whose life is bad. It would be a mistake to focus all of our sufficientarian concerns on the life as a whole rather than on shorter life segments. Thus, the doctrine of sufficiency should somehow be modified in order to clarify the time sensitivity of our sufficientarian intuitions. But I shall address this more thoroughly later.

(b) The single-level doctrine of sufficiency, and its difficulty

Given that a priority line exists, (at least) two competing principles can be formulated. The first is,

The single-level doctrine of sufficiency: Priority is to be given to benefits to those below the good-enough level. Below the threshold, benefiting people matters more the more of those people there are, and the greater the size of the benefit in question. Above the threshold, no priority is to be given, and benefiting

[15] Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London, 1966), vol. 1, pp. 284–5 (quoted in J. Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance* (Oxford and New York, 1986), p. 338).

[16] Rawls observes that Petrarch thereby 'adopts a standard for comparing them that is more basic than either' (John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford, 1972), p. 557, quoted in Griffin, ibid.).

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people matters more the more of those people there are, and the greater the size of the benefit in question.

Once one's life is good, it does not morally matter how good it is, and vice versa, once it is bad, it does not morally matter how bad it is. Specifically, improving the condition of a person who leads a bad life (call her y) is morally urgent only because a bad life is morally bad. So the fact that a second person, x, fares even worse than y does not give x any priority (whatever x's level of well-being is). Hence, when there are no priority considerations, i.e. when the distribution in question is among people who are on the same side of the priority line, the purely utilitarian solution of the distributive dilemma should prevail.

Let me exemplify the moral of the single-level version with the following cases.[17]

Case I	Alice	Bob	Case II	Alice	Bob	Case III	Alice	Bob
A	10	20	A	−1	10	A	−9	−4
B	9	25	B	−2	15	B	−10	−1

In these charts, the figures represent levels of well-being. Those who are badly off are at a level of well-being that is below zero (this is a mere stipulation, the negative numbers have no independent significance). According to the DE-priority view, in cases I–III A might be prima facie preferable, despite the (pure) utilitarian recommendation of B, which is the line of action that maximizes the average utility in all three cases. Whether or not this is the case depends on the function that assigns weight to gaining more utility compared to securing gains for the worse off.

In contrast, according to the single-level doctrine of sufficiency, an outcome is to be prima facie preferred to another in so far as the average negative utility (or disadvantage) is minimized. Hence, in Case III the single-level version prefers B to A. (Suppose that Case III is as follows: Alice and Bob suffer from a painful handicap, and Alice's handicap is much more serious than Bob's. We are confronted with two options: choosing A would not improve Alice's condition at all, but will almost completely heal Bob, while choosing option B would result in a small improvement of Alice's condition, leaving Bob's condition unchanged.

[17] Parfit warns against assigning too much precision to charts of this kind. He says: 'These figures merely show that the choice between these outcomes makes much more difference to [Alice], but that in both outcomes, [Bob] would be much worse off' (Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?', p. 3). He makes another crucial comment: 'Each extra unit is a roughly equal benefit, however well off the person who receives it' (ibid.). The same goes for my figures.

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Since they are both badly off, Alice has no priority over Bob. So, big benefit to Bob is preferable to small benefit to Alice.)

Alas, the single-level version faces obvious difficulties. It asserts that there is only one utility level that is of special privileged moral significance. This position implies that if one person is extremely badly off, living a hellish life (he is suffering from a violent cancer, say), and another is pretty well off, living just under the good-enough level (suffering from a chronic skin disease), if we can provide a one-unit benefit to either one, providing the benefit to either is equally good. Likewise, if one person is extremely well off, living a life of heavenly bliss, and another person is living moderately well, just barely above the sufficiency line, and we must choose between securing a one-unit gain for one or the other, there is no moral reason to choose between helping the person at the bliss level or helping instead the person at the moderate level.

(c) Crisp's version of the doctrine of sufficiency, and its difficulty

Recently, a different sufficientarian framework was elaborated by Roger Crisp, within which the first and the more bothering difficulty is addressed.

Crisp's version of the doctrine of sufficiency (the semi DE-priority view): Absolute priority is to be given to benefits to those who are badly off (according to Crisp, the privileged threshold below which a person is badly off is the utility level at which compassion enters). Below the threshold, benefiting people matters more the worse off those people are, the more of those people there are, and the greater the size of the benefit in question. Above the threshold, no priority is to be given, and benefiting people matters more the more of those people there are, and the greater the size of the benefit in question.[18]

The semi-egalitarian conditional follows suit. The conditional, it should be recalled, is that whenever x and y are below the good-enough threshold and x is worse off than y, benefiting x should take at least some priority over benefiting y. Thanks to this implication, the Crisp version is free from the first difficulty mentioned in the previous subsection. (It is still vulnerable to the second, though.)

I believe, however, that, this advantage notwithstanding, the semi-egalitarian conditional is burdened with serious disadvantages. In fact, I believe that the conditional is false, and, therefore, that the Crisp version is false as well. Suppose that Alice and Bob are very seriously sick – Alice has five years left to live, while Bob has only three, and both

[18] Crisp, 'Equality, Priority and Compassion', p. 758. Note that Crisp's version of the doctrine of sufficiency deviates from the DE-priority view only with regard to Case I, where it provides a reason for choosing B; in cases II and III, the Crisp version provides a reason to prefer A to B.

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lives are worth living despite being very painful. It follows that Alice is better off than Bob. Suppose that a scarce medicine might benefit each of them with a pain-free and perfectly happy year. Finally, let us assume that in any other relevant respect Alice's condition is indistinguishable from Bob's. I find no reason to prefer benefiting Bob to benefiting Alice – the prioritarian verdict in this case seems to be arbitrary.

Now, it might be argued that my intuition about the Bob/Alice case is quite uncommon. The common intuition is that, in fact, it is better to give the medicine to Bob – provided that he and Alice are the same age and have had similar levels of well-being in the past. (Of course, if Alice has five years left while Bob has only three, but Bob is 28 while Alice is 20, the medicine ought to go to Alice.) I see the force of the objection, and yet I disagree. Consider Alice's response: 'I shall live more than Bob. Hence, I have to bear these awful pains for a longer time. Indeed, I love my family and I like my job and, thanks to them, my very painful life is worth living. Overall, I am better off than Bob, despite being very badly off. Yet, this does not make the pains easier to bear. Now, note what is at stake: a pain-free year. I am entitled to such a unique experience, just like Bob.' I find this response convincing.

If Alice is right, the semi-egalitarian conditional is also false. It is not the case that *whenever* x and y are both below the good-enough level and x is worse off than y, benefiting x is prima facie preferable to benefiting y. Hence, my conclusion: with respect to some cases, the Crisp version is doing worse than the single-level version.

(d) The multi-level doctrine of sufficiency

Like the Gates/Buffett example, the Bob/Alice example is far from being conclusive. Yet, I believe that, in light of this example, it is worthwhile to look for a position which is free from the seeming faults faced by the versions of sufficientarianism presented above. Indeed, there is a reading of the doctrine of sufficiency whose chief distinguishing feature is that it rejects the egalitarian and the semi-egalitarian conditionals. But, *pace* the single-level version, this version acknowledges more than one morally significant utility difference. The price is simplicity: drawing several priority lines rather than just one. But this price is not too high, as can be seen through our leading analogy: pains might be unbearable, hard or almost negligible; similarly, some lives are not worth living, while others are just bad. In other words, within the space below the good-enough level, one might distinguish the moderately badly off, the badly off, the very badly off, the extremely badly off and so on. Each of these distinctions triggers judgements that attach derived significance to comparisons. Hence, what I shall call the multi-level version of the doctrine of sufficiency.

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The multi-level doctrine of sufficiency (the anti-egalitarian priority view): Benefiting people matters more, the more priority lines there are above the utility level at which these people are, the more of these people there are, and the greater the size of the benefit in question.

The multi-level version is anti-egalitarian, since it rejects the semi-egalitarian conditional (it is not the case that every comparison is derivatively significant, even below the good-enough level). It allows, however, more significant utility differences (and, therefore, more priority-based comparisons) than the single-level version is willing to acknowledge. To illustrate: in case both x and y are badly off, the fact that x's life is not worth living while y's is just bad is a prima facie reason to benefit x. On the other hand, had their lives been just bad, benefiting x would be as urgent as benefiting y, even where x is worse off than y. Notably, the view I recommend differs from Crisp's in a further respect: it is non-absolutist. And absolutism is clearly counterintuitive. It claims that a slight increase to one person just below the threshold outweighs huge increases to any number of people just above the threshold.[19]

II. DOES A PRIORITY LINE EXIST?

A defence of the anti-egalitarian version of the doctrine of sufficiency involves two different tasks: identifying morally privileged utility levels, and then showing that, from the moral standpoint, these are the only levels that trigger derivatively significant priority-based comparisons. A case was made in section I.B (the Gates/Buffet example) and section I.C (the Bob/Alice example) for the latter claim: some utility differences seem, at least at first glance, to be insignificant, even in a derived sense. This poses a difficulty for the prioritarian, who believes that any measurable utility difference can trigger a derived judgement, in which comparisons of different people's utility levels matter. In light of the seeming fact that there are morally insignificant utility levels even below the sufficiency threshold, I tentatively rejected the egalitarian and the semi-egalitarian conditionals.

True, DE-prioritarians are sceptical about the cogency of the counter-examples. I believe, however, that our attitude to these examples is bound to be theory-laden; the DE-prioritarians' response follows from a more general scepticism about the existence of morally privileged utility levels. After all, in the absence of a privileged utility threshold, the Basic Intuition seems to be best explained within a continuous priority view. But once such utility levels are acknowledged, my inference from the data presented in sections I.B and I.C would easily be accepted.

[19] I criticize the Crisp version in more detail in my 'Sufficiency or Priority?' (forthcoming in the *European Journal of Philosophy*).

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Hence, I shall presume that the real debate between AE- and DE-prioritarians regards the first question, namely whether or not the sufficientarian commitment to morally privileged utility level(s) is justified.

Indeed, the very idea of a priority line seems suspicious to DE-prioritarians. They agree, of course, that it is an unmistakable fact that bad lives are morally bad, but this does not mean – they would rush to add – that there is a morally important qualitative difference between good and bad lives. The phrases 'badly off' and 'well off' are just useful placeholders, or imprecise shorthands that stand for a range of levels of well-being. This objection to the doctrine of sufficiency was put forward by a major DE-prioritarian, Richard Arneson:

> One difficulty is how one nonarbitrarily sets the threshold level. Why here and not higher or lower? What we have is a smooth continuum of possible levels of overall capability for flourishing. . . . I do not see how any unique level (not even a broad thick line) can be picked out such that if a person has that level, she has 'enough'.[20]

Let me use an analogy in order to illuminate this disagreement. Consider the relation between the one-place predicate 'x is tall' and the relational phrase 'x is taller than y'. It might plausibly be argued that the first could be construed in terms of the other: x is a tall person if and only if x is at least *n* feet taller than a stipulated average. Further, it is at least prima facie plausible that we actually understand the one in terms of the other. Surely, every piece of information expressed by the predicate 'x is tall' can be expressed by statements about x's height, and about its relationship to others' height. In other words, given a certain amount of information about individuals' heights, every judgement about who is tall is deducible.

One way to put the DE-priority view objection to the doctrine of sufficiency is as follows: 'bad' is related to 'worse off than' as 'tall' is related to 'taller than'. Being badly off is, in this view, simply being worse off than an arbitrarily stipulated average.[21] Every judgement expressed by the predicate 'x is badly off' is expressible by facts about x's absolute level of well-being, and its relationship to others' absolute level of well-being. It follows that what really determines how important it is to help a person – what is of fundamental moral significance – is her absolute level of well-being. In contrast, sufficientarians believe that

[20] Arneson, 'Perfectionism', p. 56; see also Arneson, 'Egalitarianism and Responsibility', *Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999), pp. 225–47. Crisp believes that at a certain utility level the compassion of the impartial spectator enters, and that this is enough to address Arneson's challenge. I am sceptical. After all, the emotions of the impartial observer should have reasons. Arneson's question would be, 'Why does compassion enter here, and not higher or lower?'.

[21] See, however, Frank Jackson, 'Cognitivism, A Priori Deduction, and Moore', *Ethics* 113 (2003), p. 564.

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what determines how important it is to help x is the 'colour' of this level, which can be designated only in terms of sufficiency ('well off', 'badly off', 'not worth living', etc).

Metaethicists would put this sufficientarian claim as follows: the terms of sufficiency are normative or moral, while every other predicate used to designate a level of well-being is descriptive. Hence, the claim that a bad life is morally bad (so that priority is to be assigned to benefits to the badly off people) is an analytic uninformative truth, in the sense that 'the morning star can be seen in the morning' is analytic and uninformative. In contrast, given that a certain level of well-being (l) is below sufficiency, it is a morally informative truth that benefits to a person at l are especially important (in the sense that the truth that the evening star can be seen in the morning is informative).[22]

Prioritarians might argue that it is knowable a priori that there is no priority line. Suppose – they would argue – that there is a priority line, as the doctrine of sufficiency holds. Suppose that x is just below it, while y is well above it. The separation between x and y is significant, and we are required to give priority to x. Now suppose that x is only slightly better off, he is just barely above the good-enough level. In this case, he and y are both on the same side of the priority line. Therefore, x has no priority over y. Yet, the separation between them is almost as great as it was in the first case. But, the objection goes, *small* differences in the level of absolute well-being cannot have disproportionatey big moral significance. Our distributive intuitions are continuous – and the doctrine of sufficiency fails to respect them.

Once one has articulated the anti-sufficientarian argument in this way, it is obvious, I think, that it is question-begging. Sufficientarians claim that, from the moral standpoint, being badly off is an all-or-nothing state of affairs. Described in terms of sufficiency, there is no sense in which the change that causes a person (x) to lead a good life is 'small'. Other normative properties share this structure. Consider the

[22] The fact that the terms of sufficiency are not synonymous with the terms of priority implies an irreducibility thesis. Or so I argued in the text. But this is controversial. According to Jackson, one might opt for 'ethical reductionism', according to which ethical sentences follow a priori from non-moral sentences, while denying 'analytical descriptivism', according to which these sentences are analysable in terms of non-moral ones. As he puts it, 'I am not arguing "X is good" is a priori equivalent to "X is N" [where N is a natural property] . . . I am arguing that the job done by claims that X is good, . . . can be done equally well by the claim that X is N' ('Cognitivism', p. 567). If this position is coherent, the doctrine of sufficiency is built on a further claim, namely, that although the property of being badly off is the property of being at l_1 or l_2 or . . . l_m (where l_1–l_m are the utility levels below sufficiency), such an identification is not a reduction in the sense of pointing to an a priori connection. Rather, it offers a substantive identification of the normative property of being badly off in natural or non-moral terms. Cf. Mark Eli Kalderon, 'Open Questions and the Manifest Image', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (forthcoming).

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feature of being a person. It is analytically true that if certain conditions are satisfied, intentionally killing a person is murder, hence morally wrong. Now, according to a popular view, one is a person if the strength of his 'person-making capacities' is above a certain threshold. Yet, there is no point in complaining that a small change in the strength of one's capacities (namely: the change that caused him to become a person) makes a disproportionately big ethical difference (it made killing him morally wrong). After all, what matters morally is not how strong one's person-making capacities are, but whether one is a person or not.

Does the priority line exist, or is it only a stipulated average? I shall try to show that such a line exists, even if we don't yet know its exact location and character.[23]

A. The need/desire distinction as the basis for the bad life/good life distinction

My argument is addressed to those who take needs seriously – they, I shall argue, are committed to the existence of a priority line to which the doctrine of sufficiency is committed. These people would express their conviction by the following principle:

> The principle of precedence: When A needs something that B wants but does not need, then meeting A's need is prima facie morally preferable to satisfying B's desire.[24]

Indeed, this principle is quite popular. Furthermore, one reason why DE-prioritarianism sounds plausible is that prioritarians illegitimately appeal to ordinary convictions about needs. Nagel's (early) reading of Rawls's difference principle is a striking example. This principle, Nagel tells us, 'establishes an order of priority among needs and gives preference to the most urgent'.[25] Note, however, that Rawls's principle favours the worst off, rather than people whose needs are most urgent. And 'it is a mere assumption . . . that the worst off individuals have urgent needs'.[26]

I shall claim that the principle of precedence implicitly draws on a notion, which can be properly articulated solely in terms of sufficiency. To

[23] In attempting to characterize the notion of an adequate minimum, Joshua Cohen distinguishes between two interpretations of the political conception of a morally relevant threshold (see his 'Democratic Equality', *Ethics* 99 (1989), pp. 733–4). The first is developed by Brian Barry in *The Liberal Theory of Justice* (Oxford, 1973), p. 97, and the other is based on T. M. Scanlon, 'Contractualism and Utilitarianism', *Utilitarianism and Beyond,* ed. A. Sen and B. Williams (Cambridge, 1982).

[24] Harry Frankfurt, 'Necessity and Desire', reprinted in his *Importance*, p. 106. Cf. Robert Goodin, 'The Priority of Needs', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 45 (1985).

[25] Thomas Nagel, 'Equality', in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 123–4.

[26] Frankfurt, 'Equality as Moral Ideal', p. 149.

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see this, note that not everything that might sensibly be called a human need can be said to precede desires. The scope of the principle of precedence must be restricted. Moreover, the principle is credible only given a specification of the notion of need it employs. To see why this is so, suppose that Gates wants to fly around the world very fast at a moment's notice. For this he needs a private jet plane. Or, suppose a person needs certain vitamins, but his lack of them may have no effect on his well-being. Or, note that someone may, as a disabled person, need mobility assistance; but if he does not care about getting around, then plausibly his not getting that assistance would not count as an injury or loss. All these needs are obviously uninteresting from the moral standpoint.

One possible reason why Gate's need is not morally interesting is that, although Gates wants his need to be met, he does not need it to be met. Imagine that Gates cannot meet his need. Since what he needs is just a luxury, we can suppose that once he realizes that it impossible to meet his need, he would give up his desire for it, in which case he would experience no frustration. But even if he is disappointed to some extent, meeting his need would not get priority as long as he does not become badly off, at least for a certain time. I suggest then that whether or not a need is morally interesting is wholly dependent on whether or not the needy would become badly off in case the need in question is not met. Hence, the interpretation of the moral importance of needs involves a commitment to a morally privileged priority line. When A needs something that B wants but does not need – in the sense that A would become badly off unless his need is met – then meeting A's need is prima facie morally preferable to satisfying B's desire.

Let me put in a more stylized form the argument that establishes the existence of a morally privileged threshold between good and bad lives, and the way such an argument supports the AE-priority view:

(1) The principle of precedence is plausible.
(2) The best interpretation of this principle presumes a notion of a good-enough level, which functions as a priority line. Needs are morally interesting if and only if meeting them would prevent the needy from falling below this level.

Hence,

(3) Plausibly, there is at least one privileged utility threshold.

This would constitute an argument for the AE-priority view if we presume that

(4) If there are privileged utility levels, the egalitarian and the semi-egalitarian conditionals are to be rejected in light of the Buffet/Gates and the Bob/Alice examples.

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And,

(5) In case the egalitarian and the semi-egalitarian conditionals are rejected, the AE-priority view is the best explanation of the Basic Intuition.

Thus understood, the principle of precedence is just an exemplification of the doctrine of sufficiency. The doctrine assigns priority to badly off persons; the principle attaches special moral importance to helping people who are in danger of becoming badly off. My argument is, in effect, an inference to the best explanation. The doctrine of sufficiency is the theory in which the principle of precedence is most naturally embedded.[27]

In the following subsections I shall address two objections, which might be raised against (2). First, it might be argued that the principle of precedence – as I have interpreted it – is, in fact, implausible; it assigns priority to needs that have no moral significance. Second, it might be objected that the principles of precedence do not really support my anti-egalitarian version of the doctrine of sufficiency.

B. Expensive needs and the interpretation of the principle of precedence

According to my interpretation, the principle of precedence applies to every need the meeting of which is necessary to stop the subject from falling below the good-enough level. But this might seem untrue in light of Dworkin's well-known story about Louis. Famously, Louis requires an ancient claret and plover's eggs in order to reach the ordinary level of welfare, which, let us assume, is to be identified with the good-enough level.[28] Suppose now that there are some resources for

[27] It is crucial to distinguish my proposal from the one James Griffin tested and rejected. He attacks the following claim: 'Well-being, at least that conception of it to be used as the interpersonal measure for moral judgement, is the level to which basic needs are met' (Griffin, *Well-Being*, p. 42). This is the view adopted by David Miller, *Social Justice* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 136–8, and by Joel Feinberg, *Social Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1973), p. 110. I fully agree with Griffin that this account fails. 'Basic needs' is usually conceived as a title of an objective list of human needs, which includes life, health, education, etc. But on the one hand, any objective list of basic needs would leave out many heavyweight values that justify some of our desires (e.g. scholars might prefer a bigger library to another two or three weeks of life). On the other hand, the objective list includes things that many of us do not need. As noted, a disabled person needs assistance in order to get around, but if he is justified in not caring about getting around, he does not need the assistance. According to the doctrine of sufficiency as I suggest we should interpret it, priority should be assigned to satisfying one's desires, if satisfying them is necessary for one's life not being bad. I claim, in other words, that morally interesting needs are thoroughly personal.

[28] Dworkin adds that Louis can be held responsible for his taste, as he 'sets out deliberately to cultivate' it (R. Dworkin, 'What Is Equality, Part 1: Equality of Welfare', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981), p. 229).

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distribution. Everyone wants these resources, but only Louis needs them in order to meet his need for plover's eggs. It seems that we can safely extend Dworkin's ruling to this case. There is no moral reason to prefer benefiting Louis, who is in need, to benefiting others, who are not. This is so despite the fact that Louis would suffer shortfall in the important dimensions of utility and would be below the good-enough level unless the utility he would get from satisfying his desire for plover's eggs is obtained. Hence, the objection goes, there are needs which lack special moral status, even if not meeting them would cause the subject to become badly off.[29] After all, people have to shape their tastes and desires in light of what they have, rather than vice versa.[30]

The objector is right. Probably, meeting Louis's need for plover's eggs is not of special importance. The concession, however, is compatible with the principle of precedence as I interpreted it. This can be seen through a careful reflection on the structure of Louis's need.

Louis's desire constitutes a 'constrained volitional need'. A person has such a need only if he cannot help sustaining a desire for a certain object. In other words, Louis will not lose his volition just because he finds the need very difficult to satisfy. He would be pained in the process of losing it, or, in a more extreme case, he is not able to get rid of it at all. And yet, the need is volitional; the person needs the object just because he wants it. In other words, there is an important difference between Louis's need and the non-volitional need generated by, say, addiction to heroin. The addict's desire for the drug 'moves him to obtain something that he needs, and that he cannot help needing independently of his

[29] This argument is conceived as another attack on the role of needs in our moral and political thought. A variety of sceptical attitudes to needs can be found in Brian M. Barry, *Political Argument* (London, 1965), pp. 48–9; Nancy Frazer, 'Talking about Needs', *Ethics* 99 (1989), pp. 292–3; Jeremy Waldron, 'The Role of Rights in Practical Reasoning: "Rights" versus "Needs" ', *The Journal of Ethics* 4 (2000), pp. 115–35.

[30] In light of Dworkin's challenge, some philosophers, notably Cohen and Arneson, have come to the conclusion that justice involves fighting brute bad luck. They would modify the principle of precedence as follows: when A needs something that B wants but does not need, meeting A's need should be prior to satisfying B's desire, if and only if A is not responsible for his need. See Gerald A. Cohen, 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice', *Ethics* 99 (1989); Richard Arneson, 'Equality and Equality of Opportunity for Welfare', *Philosophical Studies* 55 (1989). Cf. John Roemer, *Theories of Distributive Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), p. 238. Cohen seems to be quite sympathetic to the Priority View in his 'If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich', *Journal of Ethics* 4 (2000), p. 16. Arneson has recently applied this intuition to the DE-priority view. See Arneson, 'Luck-Egalitarianism', p. 340. Cf. A. Stark, 'Beyond Choice: Rethinking the Post-Rawlsian Debate over Egalitarian Justice', *Political Theory* 30 (2002). See Dworkin's response to Sen and Cohen in R. Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), ch. 7.

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desire for it'.[31] In contrast, there is no non-volitional need to which Louis's desire corresponds.[32]

The first thing to note with regard to this feature of Louis's need is that if there is a completely painless psychological treatment that might induce him to lose the desire for the plover's eggs, then his need is 'disjunctive'. That is, he needs either the eggs or the psychological treatment. Unless he has one of them, he will suffer injury or harm. Furthermore, even if the process of freeing himself of his desire would necessarily be painful, Louis's need might be disjunctive. This is because, according to a plausible account of well-being, it would be less harmful for him to lose the desire, since the intrinsic or the instrumental value of the plover's eggs does not justify his strong desire for it.

Let me focus on this latter conception of well-being. It characterizes constrained volitional needs for valueless objects as disjunctive. A person who cannot help wanting a valueless object needs either the object or to be free of his desire for it. If this is correct, knowing the content of one's constrained volitional need depends on a detailed theory of well-being and value. With no conception of well-being, the real content of one's volitional needs is completely indeterminate. Volitional needs are constituted by desires, without which the agent might (in some cases) be better off.[33] True, it is possible that it is so hard for Louis to lose his expensive preference that, had he tried, he would become badly off. Then, admittedly, sufficientarians would give some priority to meeting his expensive need. Note, however, that according to such a conception of well-being, there might be cases in which we would not attend to a constrained volitional need at all. Suppose that we believe that Louis's need is constituted by an obsessive desire from which he cannot rid himself. It seems possible that satisfying the desire that constitutes this need would not improve his condition. The reason is that people become better off, not by our fulfilling their obsessive desires, but by our helping them to be less obsessive. Hence, if Louis cannot become less obsessive, his true need cannot be met.

In sum, my point is that our sufficientarian intuition tends to blur in Louis's case, because of the possibility that, despite being difficult, it is good for him to lose the need for plover's eggs, rather than to meet it.

These considerations enable me to restate my interpretation of the principle of precedence. The point that the objector misses is that the principle of precedence does not imply that there is a prima facie reason to provide Louis with plover's eggs. We might believe that what Louis really needs is to rid himself of his desire for plover's eggs, and to

[31] Frankfurt, 'Necessity and Desire', p. 114.
[32] Ibid., p. 115.
[33] For a similar response to Dworkin's challenge, see Griffin, *Well-Being*, pp. 47–9.

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this need we would assign priority, in accordance with the principle of precedence. Indeed, even if constrained volitional needs satisfy the principle of precedence, these needs 'appear worthy only of rather qualified or equivocal concern'.[34] But the reason is not that the principle of precedence is shaky, but rather that the true needs of the people who have constrained volitional needs are unknown to us.

C. Sufficiency and time

The second objection can be put as follows. We would ordinarily say that people who are very well off, overall, can have urgent unmet needs. For instance, a person who has led a great life for eighty years can be in need of romance or remission of the cancer from which he suffers. Hence, meeting his needs is not of special importance, according to a whole-life version of the doctrine of sufficiency. Alas, this is incompatible with the principle of precedence (which, according to the argument in section II.A, is supposed to support the doctrine of sufficiency). This principle mandates assigning priority to one's needs in any case where meeting this need is the only way to prevent one's *present* condition from becoming bad.

In effect, the policy of minimizing unmet needs might be taken to be a version of negative utilitarianism, which recommends minimizing pain and suffering. As such, it assigns priority to people whose needs are more urgent at the moment, rather than to the badly off. Worse, the principle might be read as giving priority to needs rather than to persons.[35] To illustrate this by way of Parfit's example, suppose that we have to choose between one of two policies. The first provides very minor relief for a painful illness, which afflicts some rich people; the other significantly benefits an equal number of poor people by subsidizing seaside holidays.[36] The principle of precedence might be read as recommending benefiting the rich, even if their lives, on the whole, are better than those of the poor. In contrast, the doctrine of sufficiency – if it is built on the distinction between bad and good lives – assigns priority to people whose lives are bad.[37]

[34] Frankfurt, 'Necessity and Desire', p. 115.

[35] Parfit, 'Equality or Priority?', p. 21.

[36] As the relief provided by the first policy is minor, everyone involved would prefer the second option.

[37] Cf. Dennis McKerlie, 'Equality and Time', *Ethics* 99 (1989). McKerlie describes the varieties of egalitarianism generated by different possible answers to the question of how egalitarians should 'specify the units across which the distribution is to take place or the items with a claim to equal distribution' (p. 476). McKerlie observes that the most common view among egalitarians is that 'different people's shares of resources, or welfare, should be equal when we consider the total amounts of those things that they receive over the complete course of their lives' (ibid.).

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This objection points to an ambiguity in the doctrine of sufficiency, an ambiguity that is generated by a real dilemma. Note, however, that every other ethics of distribution faces a parallel dilemma. Take the egalitarian conditional. What is the relationship between 'x is worse off than y at the moment' and 'x is worse off than y'? Would egalitarians or DE-prioritarians assign priority to x on the basis of the first statement alone – or would they like to know how x fares in general? As McKerlie would put it, any ethics of distribution should specify the units across which the just distribution is to take place. Hence, sufficientarians have to characterize the relationships of 'badly off at the moment' and 'badly off' *simpliciter*, and then to face squarely the task of indicating to what extent their doctrine is interested in people's lives taken as wholes, compared to its interest in people's condition at a certain time.

D. The philosophical difference between the DE- and the AE-priority views

In a clear sense, all the positions reviewed in this article are modified versions of utilitarianism. They all determine the value of a given policy on the basis of three factors: how much utility this policy would bring; how the utility achieved by these polices would be distributed across persons, and finally, the absolute level of well-being of those who might be affected by these policies. In a very broad sense, ethical theories which take only these factors into their account of just distribution deserve the name 'weighted utilitarianism'.[38] But in another sense, there is a deep philosophical difference between the derivatively egalitarian and the anti-egalitarian priority views.

According to Rawls, the maximin principle is strictly opposed to utilitarianism, for maximin is individualistic, while utilitarianism is anti-individualistic. I suggest that the DE-priority view is best viewed as a trade-off between Rawlsian individualism, on the one hand, and anti-individualistic utilitarianism, on the other. In contrast, the AE-priority views (the single-level and the multi-level versions of the doctrine of sufficiency) are best interpreted as anti-individualistic. Let me, then, introduce the Rawlsian distinction.

Rawls characterizes utilitarianism as anti-individualistic because it extends to society the 'principle of choice of one man'.[39] The rule for the individual is to maximize utility; the utilitarian distributor applies this rule to the whole society by conflating 'all systems of desires'.[40] In contrast, the Rawlsian maximin principle, which assigns absolute priority to the worst off, is individualistic. For numbers, according to

[38] Richard Arneson, 'Against Rights', *Philosophical Issues* 11 (2001), p. 186.
[39] Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, p. 28.
[40] Ibid., p. 29.

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the maximin principle, do not count – absolute priority is to be assigned to helping the worst off people, whatever their number (and the size of the benefit that can be achieved for them).

The implications, however, are unacceptable. To illustrate the absurdity that results from assigning absolute priority to the worst off people, consider an example suggested by Crisp. Suppose a person is in quite serious pain, and a group of a thousand people is in almost as serious pain. The absolute priority view favours giving the worst off person a chocolate over alleviating the serious pain of a thousand others.

> Because the absolute priority view is an 'innumerate' maximin principle, it will . . . allow the smallest benefit to the smallest number of worst off to trump any benefit . . . to any but the worst off, even the next worst off.[41]

I suggest that, in trying to avoid absolute priority, the derivatively egalitarian priority views presented in the previous sections combine individualism and utilitarian anti-individualism. They allow us to give priority to the worse off people, but in doing so, to take into account the size of the benefits at stake and the numbers of people who will benefit.

In contrast, the best reading of the anti-egalitarian priority views would present them as anti-individualistic (in the Rawlsian sense). These views *do* extend to society the 'principle of choice of one man'. There is, of course, an important difference between them and pure utilitarianism. But the difference is rooted in a different conception of the individual's welfare. Rather than maximizing utility, according to the AE-priority view, the rule for the individual is to minimize disadvantage (negative utility), and only then maximize utility. This is plausible enough, as our leading analogy suggests. Suppose that Alice would suffer pains in the near future if she were to satisfy her desire for pleasing drugs now. There is nothing at stake apart from pain and pleasure. Alice knows that, in a clear sense, the pleasure is worth the pain: the pains are easy to bear, and the pleasure is special and intense. (The claim that the pleasure is worth the pain is not an expression of a preference, but rather a factual claim that should justify a preference. Imagine that there are scientific tools for measuring the intensity of pain and pleasure, and that Alice is aware of the plain fact that this kind of drug brings about pleasure that is worth the pain.) This fact notwithstanding, Alice reasonably prefers avoiding the pains to pursuing the pleasures.

Extending to the whole society the rule that assigns priority to minimizing disadvantage over maximizing utility generates the

[41] Crisp, 'Equality, Priority and Compassion', p. 752.

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single-level doctrine of sufficiency as a distinctive ethics of distribution. Case IV is the best illustration:

Case IV	Alice	Bob	Carol
A	−10	−1	10
B	−9	−4	15

Given an AE-priority view with an appropriate weight function, A is preferable, since this is the option that minimizes disadvantage. An anti-individualistic interpretation of the multi-level doctrine of sufficiency can be easily elaborated in the same spirit.

III. CONCLUSION

To summarize, then, the levelling down objection should lead us to avoid using the notion of equality to incorporate the Basic Intuition. Two deeply incompatible views can be offered as the theoretical background to this intuition. The first is the DE-priority view. Although, in this view, equality *per se* does not matter, the DE-priority view is individualistic to some extent, and it has a built-in bias towards equality. The other view, the AE-priority view, is anti-egalitarian in the sense that it rejects the egalitarian conditional. Additionally, it is naturally interpreted as anti-individualistic. I argued that the AE-priority view is to be identified with the doctrine of sufficiency. Additionally, I argued that a decision between these rival views is wholly dependent on whether morally privileged utility thresholds exist, or whether the 'good-enough level' is just an arbitrary stipulated average, which has no moral importance. Thus, the sufficientarians must accomplish an additional task, namely, proving that the well-being space contains a qualitative morally privileged distinction between good and bad lives. The second part of this article has shown that our notion of need is a good starting point for validating such a distinction.[42]

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