Croatian Journal of Philosophy
Vol. XVII, No. 49, 2017

Maximization, Slotean Satisficing, and Theories of Sufficientarian Justice

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In this paper I seek to assess the responses provided by several theories of sufficientarian justice in cases where individuals hold different conceptions of rationality. Towards this purpose, I build two test cases and study the normative prescriptions which various sufficiency views offer in each of them. I maintain that resource sufficientarianism does not provide a normatively plausible response to the first case, since its distributive prescriptions would violate the principle of personal good and that subjective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism as well as objective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism committed to the headcount claim do not provide normatively plausible responses to the second case, since their distributive prescriptions would violate the principle of equal importance. I then claim that an objective-threshold welfare sufficientarian view committed to prioritarianism under the threshold offers the normatively plausible response to both cases and therefore resists the challenge raised by scenarios that involve differential conceptions of rationality.

Keywords: Maximization, resources, satisficing, sufficientarianism, welfare.

1. *Introduction*

Sufficientarianism holds that distributive justice should primarily be concerned with providing individuals *enough* of some preferred conception of the proper currency of justice. This core idea embodies two central claims, termed by Paula Casal the *positive thesis* and the *negative thesis*, respectively. According to Casal, "the positive thesis stresses the

* I thank Adelin Dumitru, Adrian Miroiu, Tom Parr and two anonymous reviewers for comments on earlier drafts of this paper, as well as an audience at the University of Manchester, where some of the arguments developed here were originally presented.

importance of people living above a certain threshold, free from deprivation. The negative thesis denies the relevance of certain additional distributive requirements" (Casal 2007: 297–298).[1] The view has originally been developed by Frankfurt (1987) as a reaction to the pervasive egalitarian strand of thought characterizing contemporary analytical political philosophy and, independently, by Crisp (2003) as an alternative to both telic egalitarianism and prioritarianism. It has subsequently been extended by a number of authors (Orr 2005, Benbaji 2005, 2006, Casal 2007, Huseby 2010, Shields 2012, Axelsen and Nielsen 2015, 2016), who vary different components of the original theories and provide their own versions of the sufficiency view. In this article, I seek to explore the plausibility of a number of sufficientarian theories in light of their responses to cases in which individuals act on the basis of different conceptions of rationality.[2] There are a number of reasons why examining normative theories in light of such cases is important. First, case-based desirability critiques form a central part of the methodology of analytical political and moral philosophy, as they provide tools with which philosophers can submit theories to "normative tests" (McDermott 2008: 19). Thus, if the cases constructed are useful in illuminating the moral commitments of theories, and in particular, their counterintuitive and morally problematic consequences, they should be taken seriously by philosophers, regardless of their practical likelihood of occurrence. Second, taking such cases into account is useful in illuminating some of the ontological commitments of normative theories as well. In the particular context of sufficientarianism discussed here, the cases will show that some sufficiency views provide adequate responses only when all individuals are satisficers, while others provide adequate responses only when all individuals are maximizers. Third, a wide range of empirical evidence shows that individuals are not actually identical maximizing machines as the *homo economicus* model of neoclassical economics assumes for methodological purposes, but that they are distinctly rational (or, even irrational) on various dimensions. The differential nature of human reasoning should therefore be taken into account when we design normative theories in general, and theories concerning distributive justice in particular.

The paper is structured as follows: in section 2 I describe the constitutive elements of a sufficientarian theory of justice and show how they can be varied in order to obtain a number of different sufficiency views. In section 3 I describe the two conceptions of rationality used in

[1] Some sufficientarians replace the latter with a weaker, *shift thesis*, which only states that "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" (Shields 2012: 108).

[2] In particular, I am only concerned here with what Satz and Ferejohn call a "formal and thin conception of rationality" (Satz and Ferejohn 1994: 72), taking into account only the mathematical properties of individual preferences, not their content.

constructing the cases with which the paper is concerned. In section 4 I describe the first case, *Resource plenitude*, and argue that the response which resource sufficientarianism offers to such cases is morally objectionable. In section 5 I describe the second case, *Resource scarcity*, and argue that the responses which subjective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism and objective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism committed to the headcount claim offer to such cases are also morally objectionable. I then argue, in section 6, that objective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism committed to prioritarianism under the threshold offers the morally plausible response in both cases and is impervious to the challenge raised in this paper by weakening the standard assumption of maximizing rationality. Section 7 concludes.

2. *Theoretical background: Sufficientarianism*

Since sufficientarianism is a view of distributive justice, one of the key issues which it needs to address in order to be considered a complete normative theory is to specify a currency of justice, or otherwise stated, to answer the *equality of what* question. In this respect, classical sufficientarian theories (Frankfurt 1987,[3] Crisp 2003) as well as many recent developments (Benbaji 2005, Huseby 2010) standardly take welfare[4] as the currency of justice, while others endorse either resources (Orr 2005) or some conception of capabilities[5] (Anderson 1999, Axelsen and Nielsen 2015, 2016).

While the currency issue concerns all theories of distributive jus-

[3] Frankfurt's preferred currency is actually somewhat more difficult to ascertain, since his discussions on distributions are generally conducted only in terms of money. This has led Temkin (2003: 765) to suggest that Frankfurt is actually attacking a straw man, since egalitarians would agree that it is not simply the inequality of economic resources which we should aim to mitigate. But there are good grounds to claim that he does in fact employ welfare as currency, a position which we may infer from his operationalization of the threshold notion (see below), with economic resources exclusively playing the role of distribuendum of justice (see Gheaus 2016 for the distinction between distribuenda and currencies of justice). The idea that Frankfurt proposes a welfarist version of sufficientarianism is also suggested by Goodin (1987: 45–46), Nathanson (2005: 371) and Huseby (2010: 181).

[4] Following Arneson (2000), throughout this article I use the terms utility, welfare and well-being interchangeably. While the three concepts may not be, strictly speaking, identical under some interpretations, this terminological simplification is required in order to preserve a common language for the family of distributive justice theories with which I am concerned here, since various sufficientarians use all of them to denote the same idea (for instance Frankfurt (1987) uses the term utility, Crisp (2003) uses utility and welfare interchangeably, Huseby (2010) uses welfare and well-being interchangeably and Benbaji (2005) uses all three of them interchangeably).

[5] In this paper I will only be concerned with theories instantiating either welfare or resources as a currency, since the informational framework of the cases in which I am interested in is too parsimonious to adequately capture the demands of capability sufficientarianism. See, however, Arneson (2006) for a powerful criticism of this view.

tice, a complete sufficiency view needs to further address four other questions as well: (1) what the sufficiency threshold is, (2) how the currency is to be distributed below the threshold of sufficiency, (3) how the currency is to be distributed above the threshold of sufficiency and (4) how strict should the priority relation generated by the threshold be. Various sufficientarian theories offer different responses to the first question. Harry Frankfurt sets the sufficiency threshold at the level of *contentment*, understood in the sense that while an individual's marginal utility for gaining economic benefits above the threshold is not nullified, she does not have an *active interest* in obtaining more economic resources. In his own phrasing, "the fact that he is content is quite consistent with his recognizing that his economic circumstances could be improved and that his life might as a consequence become better than it is. But this possibility is not important to him" (Frankfurt 1987: 39). Roger Crisp offers a different answer. To illustrate the idea of a sufficiency threshold, he uses two elements: (1) the notion of impartial spectator and (2) the notion of compassion. According to him, "the spectator puts himself or herself into the shoes of all those affected and is concerned more to the extent that the individual in question is badly off. A spectator who shows no special concern for the badly off has a vice—he or she is uncompassionate" (Crisp 2003: 757). What results from the conjunction of the notion of an impartial spectator with that of compassion is the sufficiency threshold, one which is in his own terms "principled and nonarbitrary" (Crisp 2003: 757), and which is set at the highest level of welfare at which this impartial spectator still feels compassion for the individual in question. Since it is the spectator who evaluates the level of welfare, not each particular individual, the implication of the theory is that the level where compassion disappears is the same for all individuals. Other sufficientarians, such as Huseby (2010) or Benbaji (2005) use multi-level thresholds instead of single-level thresholds, as was the case with those proposed by Frankfurt (1987) and Crisp (2003). Huseby distinguishes between two different sufficientarian threshold levels, a minimal one and a maximal one, with the former being located at the level where basic means to subsistence, or the basic needs of the individual, are satisfied, and the latter being located at the level where the individual can be said to be *content*, understood here as "satisfaction with the overall quality of one's life" (Huseby 2010: 181). In contrast with the two-tiered sufficiency view proposed by Huseby, Benbaji's view recognizes three levels of sufficiency as morally salient: a *personhood* level, a *pain* level and a *luxury* level. The first of these is located just above the level where the life of the respective person is not worth living anymore,[6] the second one just above the level where individuals have negative welfare values

[6] Benbaji avoids the implication that non-human beings would therefore have lives not worth living, by specifying the additional condition that only the life of a being which *falls* below the threshold, after previously being above it would be subjected to the application of this principle (Benbaji 2006: 339).

and the third one is placed at the level where individuals "are so well off at that time that every small benefit to them would be a luxury" (Benbaji 2006: 339–342).

The four sufficiency views described in the previous paragraph give rise to a general and fundamental distinction in the operationalization of welfare sufficientarian thresholds, namely between *subjective* thresholds and *objective* thresholds. Theories that use subjective thresholds maintain that the level of welfare at which the threshold is placed is established by each individual through the means of particular perceptions of her own welfare level. In general, to operationalize this threshold, we assume that there is a point in the welfare functions of individuals where they will say that they are, in some specific sense, satisfied with their current welfare level. Frankfurt's (1987) theory as well as Huseby's view share this feature. In Frankfurt's theory, this point is represented by the level after which individuals would not have an active interest in pursuing the accumulation of further resources as means for welfare enhancements. In Huseby's proposal, this point would be represented by the level at which the individual would consider that he is content with his level of utility. By contrast, theories that use objective thresholds maintain that the welfare level at which the threshold is placed is set by an external source, without any input from the agent subjected to the distributive scheme. Crisp's account of the sufficiency threshold is paradigmatic for this view, since he builds his notion of a threshold in relation to an impartial spectator, who evaluates the distribution and establishes the threshold at the utility level where compassion on the part of the impartial spectator would enter. While Benbaji's account is not so explicit in this regard, the personhood and pain thresholds seem to be non-controversially objective, since decision-making capacities are not subjected to individual perception and a negative level of welfare is described in neutral terms to the perception of the agent subjected to it. Even though we have less information on the conceptualization of the luxury threshold, it seems plausible to also include it in the category of objective thresholds, since otherwise it might be claimed that examples such as the notorious *Beverly Hills* case (see Benbaji 2005: 314–315) would require some form of redistribution, if at least some of the individuals involved would not consider that they are at a luxury level of welfare.

The second distinction between welfare sufficiency views that is important for the purposes of this paper, concerns the second question raised earlier on in this section, i.e. how the currency is to be distributed below the threshold of sufficiency.[7] The main positions regarding distribution below the threshold are to either commit to the *headcount claim,* which states that "we should maximize the number of people who secure enough" (Shields 2012: 103) or to commit to prioritarianism,

[7] While the third and fourth questions raised above are important in their own rights, they have no bearing on the arguments in this article.

which in its canonical formulation states that "benefiting people matters more the worse off these people are" (Parfit 1997: 213). To briefly illustrate the difference between the two views, consider an example where we have two individuals with an identical sufficiency level of 20 units of welfare, in which the first one has in the current state of the world a level of 0 welfare and the second one is at a level of 15 units of welfare and in which we have to decide on how to distribute 5 extra units of welfare. While the sufficientarian committed to the headcount claim would give these 5 extra units to the second person, since it would enable one person to reach the sufficiency threshold, the sufficientarian committed to prioritarianism under the threshold would give more (or even all) units to the first person, since benefiting her has greater moral weight considering that she is worse-off. Both positions are defended by various sufficientarians, with the headcount claim being endorsed by Frankfurt (1987: 31) or Dorsey (2008: 437–438) and prioritarianism under the threshold by Crisp (2003: 758), Huseby (2010: 184) or Shields (2012: 111).

With these distinctions in mind, we can proceed with analysing the plausibility of various sufficiency views in light of the cases described to be in section 4 and 5. However, before advancing to this point it is worthwhile to describe the basic elements of a further distinction which is central to my cases, namely the distinction between maximizing views of rationality and satisficing views of rationality. I take up this task in the next section.

3. *Maximization and Slotean satisficing*

While discussions on the concepts of *maximization* and *satisficing* have occupied a significant place in economics ever since Simon's suggestion of the latter idea (Simon 1947),[8] in political and moral philosophy, the distinction between *maximizing* and *satisficing* types of rationality is usually traced back to Slote's (1984) restatement of the idea of satisficing as a permissible operationalization of act-consequentialism. The original development of the idea that people might act in a satisficing rather than maximizing manner was part of the wider project undertook by Simon to "replace the global rationality of economic man with a kind of rational behavior that is compatible with the access to information and computational capacities that are actually possessed by organisms, including man, in the kinds of environments in which such organisms exist" (Simon 1955: 99). Briefly, we can state that while maximization entails the three-step sequence: (1) enumerate all the options on offer, (2) evaluate each, (3) choose the best option, a satisficing behaviour follows the sequence: (1) set an aspiration level such that any option which reaches or surpasses it is good enough, (2) begin to enumerate and evaluate the options on offer, (3) choose the first option

[8] Even though it was not introduced under this specific label.

which, given the aspiration level, is good enough (Pettit 1984: 166–167). Slote's conception of satisficing departs from Simon's, however, in an essential way. As he argues, "the sort of satisficing involved [in his own theory] is not (merely) the kind familiar in the economics literature where an individual seeks something other than optimum results, but a kind of satisficing that actually rejects the available better for the available good enough" (Slote 1984: 148). This proposal lies in stark contrast to the classical understanding of satisficing, where the individual appeals to it in order to "reduce the informational and computational requirements of rational choice" (Byron 1998: 71), but given two options which differ from the perspective of the utility produced, would always choose the better one.[9, 10] Phrased in this way, it is not immediately clear whether Slote's notion of satisficing can make sense as a rational strategy, since it would explicitly reject a better alternative in favour of a worse one. In order to yield some intuitive plausibility to the notion, Slote appeals to a number of examples.

In the first such example, you are asked to imagine that you are at work and have just finished eating lunch. You return to your desk and realize that there is a candy bar or a coke in the refrigerator which is placed right next to you. While you are no longer hungry or thirsty, you are not satiated to the point where consumption of the candy bar or coke would not give you additional pleasure. However, you still choose not to consume them (Slote 1984: 143–144). In the second example, we are asked to think of a fairy-tale hero who is given the opportunity to have a single wish granted and does not choose a big pot of gold or a million dollars, but just enough to enable him and his family to live a comfortable life (Slote 1984: 147). In the third example, we are asked to imagine a situation where a family's car breaks down in the middle of the night next to a hotel. The family is quite poor so they cannot afford to rent a room or purchase a meal. Given these conditions, the hotel manager arranges for them to be accommodated, free of charge, in one of the vacant rooms, although not the most expensive one, and receive a meal, also free of charge, from the evening's left-overs, although not the best meal available (Slote 1984: 149–150). The strand that ties together all these examples is the fact that the agent responsible for making a choice had a set of alternatives available before him and de-

[9] Slote himself admits that this is the position of Simon, and further states that the "idea of rational satisficing implies only that individuals or firms do not always seek to optimize and are satisfied with attaining a certain 'aspiration level' less than the best that might be envisaged. It does not imply that it could be rational actually to reject the better for the good enough in situations where both were available" (Slote 1984: 145).

[10] The reason why I do not take into account classical satisficing, but rather the Slotean version, is precisely the fact that Simon's individual would satisfice due to time or informational constraints and such issues do not usually bear much weight in normative theories. Simonian satisficing is thus unlikely to provide the groundwork for any interesting analysis of sufficientarianism.

liberately chose a sub-maximizing one. Slote claims that in each one of the cases discussed however, the strategy of choosing less than the best can be construed as rational in any common-sense interpretation. The primary reason which Slote offers is that individuals might sometimes exhibit a form of moderation which precludes them from taking more benefits rather than fewer.[11] In his own words, "the moderate individual [...] is someone content with (what he considers) a reasonable amount of enjoyment; he wants to be satisfied and up to a certain point he wants more satisfactions rather than fewer, to be better off rather than worse off; but there is a point beyond which he has no desire, and even refuses, to go" (Slote 1986: 60).

It is, of course, not clear whether the examples provided by Slote couldn't be otherwise grounded by various rational (in the classical sense) reasons, thereby making his claim about the non-maximizing character of his proposal collapse. This idea is suggested by Pettit (1984), who discusses the examples offered above and, while agreeing with Slote that they are instances of satisficing behaviour, he adds that they can be construed as rational precisely because of other considerations which the agent weighed in her decision-making process. Only if no such reasons are brought into the picture, the unmotivated sub-maximization which results is in Pettit's terms irrational. In deference to the possibility that individuals satisfice for the sake of a more sophisticated brand of maximization, Slote proposes a distinction between two types of satisficing, namely *instrumental* satisficing on the one hand and non-instrumental or *intrinsical* satisficing on the other (Slote 2004: 14). The instrumental view of satisficing holds that an individual might deliberately choose an inferior alternative only when this course of action would lead to an overall maximization of welfare. In various forms (see for instance Schmidtz 2004 or Narveson 2004), the plausibility of this general view encounters no major resistance amongst political and moral philosophers. The non-instrumental view of satisficing however, which Slote himself admits has been "decidedly the minority view on the rationality involved in satisficing" (Slote 2004: 14), claims that limiting consumption of goods before reaching the point where the marginal utility experienced is null has intrinsical value. The plausibility of this idea is much more controversial and no common ground is reached in this respect.[12] Since the cases which I build in the following section do not rest on a particular view of Slotean satisficing I will not provide a defence of the intrinsical conception, but rather interpret the idea of Slotean satisficing in accordance with the instrumental conception. If the intrinsical conception would turn out to

[11] See, however, Schmidtz (2004: 32) for a disentanglement of the ideas of moderation and satisficing, which Slote often uses interchangeably (Slote 1984: 147, Slote 1986: 65, Slote 2004: 16).

[12] For a wider view on the debate between critics and defenders of satisficing views in moral and political philosophy see Byron (2004).

be plausible, the arguments developed would analogously apply to that interpretation as well.

What is important to note, however, is that the notion of Slotean satisficing is not equivalent to other notions used to build subjective thresholds in some sufficientarian views, such as Frankfurt's account of contentment. As noted in section 2, the idea of contentment proposed by Frankfurt does not imply that the individual who reaches her subjectively-set threshold cannot gain any further welfare above this level. Instead, since in Frankfurt's view "the use of the notion of 'enough' pertains to *meeting a standard* rather than to *reaching a limit*" (Frankfurt 1987: 37, original emphasis), it is entirely plausible to claim that given two options, one of which is right at the threshold of contentment and the other one somewhat above it, the individual in question would choose the latter over the former, due to the higher output of utility, even though she would be in one sense satisfied with both. But the idea of satisficing, as used by Slote, has different implications. While additional resources would still yield an improvement in those aspects of welfare derived from the material consumption of goods, it would not lead to an *all things considered* increase in welfare due to the fact that it would cause counterbalancing disutility in other areas associated with welfare, such as individual attitudes towards moderation. Otherwise, the idea that someone could choose the *available good enough* over the *available better* would be conceptually inconsistent. This notion of satisficing, which is stronger than Frankfurt's idea of contentment, will be used in the subsequent sections.

4. *Resource sufficientarianism and violations of the principle of personal good*

Consider the following case:

> *Resource plenitude.* In a society composed of three individuals (*Alice*, *Brian* and *Charlie*), there are 60 resources available for distribution. Each unit of resource consumed yields exactly one unit of utility for every individual and none of them are satiated at any point. Alice is a satisficer, with her aspiration level set at 30 units of utility, Brian is a satisficer, with his aspiration level set at 10 units of utility and Charlie is a maximizer.

Consider now that, irrespective of the procedure used, the resource sufficientarian,[13] who claims that what is important from the point of view of justice is that *enough* resources are distributed to each individual, has established that the sufficiency threshold is at 20 units of resources. Fortunately, from the resource sufficientarian's point of

[13] I take Orr's (2005) view to be the standard version of resource sufficientarianism. While Orr does not provide answers to a number of questions which a complete sufficientarian theory should standardly address, the endorsement of resources as a currency of sufficientarianism is enough for my present purposes.

view, there are just enough resources to be distributed so that everyone reaches the threshold proposed, thus 20 resources will be distributed to each individual. Call this distribution D1 [Alice – 20; Brian – 20; Charlie – 20]. This distribution of resources will in turn be converted into 20 units of utility for Alice, 20 units of utility for Charlie and 10 units of utility for Brian, considering that he does not gain any extra benefits from resources above the amount of 10.[14] But consider the alternative distributions D2 [Alice – 25, Brian – 10; Charlie – 25] and D3 [Alice – 30; Brian – 10; Charlie – 20], which would map into either 25 units of utility for Alice and Charlie and 10 for Brian (in D2) or 30 units of utility for Alice, 20 units of utility for Charlie and 10 for Brian (in D3). Both D2 and D3 yield more aggregate utility than D1 without making the situation worse-off for anyone. Still, the resource sufficientarian is bound to claim that D1 is, at least *in one way*, better than D2 and better than D3, since D1 is the only distribution where everyone reaches the threshold of sufficiency. Thus, resource sufficientarianism violates what Broome has called the *principle of personal good*, which states that "if we take two distributions that have the same population, and if one of them is better than the other for someone, and at least as good as the other for everyone, then it is better"[15] (Broome 2004: 58). If we take this principle seriously, as many political and moral philosophers do (e.g. Broome 1991, Broome 2004, Vallentyne 1993, Tungodden 2003), we have a strong reason to object to resource sufficientarianism. Furthermore, not only is this view clashing with the principle of personal good, but it is also committed to benefit destruction, since it prescribes wasting 10 resources, which in an alternative distribution could have otherwise benefited either Alice or Charlie. In addition, the two problems raised here are proportionally amplified when: (1) the difference between the resource threshold set by the theory and the aspiration levels which are below the threshold increases and (2) the number of individuals with aspiration levels below the threshold increases.

One possible objection to the idea that resource sufficientarianism might be committed to violations of the principle of personal good and to benefit destruction is that the example proposed is simply implausible, since the aspiration level of an individual would not be positioned below the resource threshold. In the absence of any particular specification of a resource threshold in the sufficientarian literature, it is difficult to reply to this objection in a very concrete manner. However, one general response is that for resource sufficientarianism to gain any moral plausibility, the threshold cannot be located at very low levels, since at such

[14] The alternative would be that Brian's utility actually decreases when further receiving resources. I do not take this stronger case into consideration here, since the weaker case suffices for making the intended point.

[15] This can also be interpreted as a strong form of the Pareto Principle. Tungodden remarks that while the two are structurally identical, the principle of personal good is "stated in the space of individual good or well-being and not in the space of individual preferences" (Tungodden 2003: 8).

levels the negative thesis would no longer appear attractive. Consider that such a low threshold would be the level where individuals would have only very basic access to food, water, clean air and so forth, so that they can survive on a day-to-day basis. It would be, I think, correct to claim that no aspiration level can be found lower than this threshold. If such a threshold was in place, however, it would also mean that justice should not be concerned with the difference in resources between someone who has enough to barely survive for another day and a billionaire like Bill Gates, a position which intuitively appears to be radically implausible. Defending a multi-level version of resource sufficientarianism might partially mitigate this problem, in that the lowest threshold might be placed at a level below which no aspiration level would reasonably be located. But introducing a higher threshold, which is required in order to retain the attractiveness of the negative thesis, opens up the real possibility that the aspiration level of some individuals falls under this threshold, for reasons which have to do with attitudes towards moderation, religious attitudes etc. If we take case-implication critiques (Sen 1979: 197) seriously, then this possibility grounds a plausible objection against resource sufficientarianism.

5. *Welfare sufficientarianism and violations of the principle of equal importance*

Now consider a second case:

> *Resource scarcity*. In a society composed of three individuals (*Alice*, *Brian* and *Charlie*), there are 40 resources available for distribution. Each unit of resource consumed yields exactly one unit of utility for every individual and none of them are satiated at any point. Alice is a satisficer, with her aspiration level set at 30 units of utility, Brian is a satisficer, with his aspiration level set at 10 units of utility and Charlie is a maximizer.

Let us first consider the response which a subjective-threshold welfare sufficientarian, such as Frankfurt, would give to this case. Since Alice and Brian have aspiration levels set at 30 and 10, respectively, consider these levels as their subjective thresholds.[16] Further, according to Frankfurt, what is important from the point of view of justice in cases of resource shortages is that the incidence of sufficiency is maximized. The two positions converge to yield a precise distribution in this case, which is: D4 [Alice – 30; Brian – 10; Charlie – 0]. This distribution is the only one which maximizes the incidence of sufficiency, understood in a subjective sense, since it is the only one in which two of the three individuals have reached the threshold. Since Charlie has no threshold of contentment, he will receive no resources. Furthermore, if a windfall should occur, yielding 20 more resources for distribution (thereby

[16] Noting that they are not only levels of contentment, in Frankfurt's sense, but the stronger types of aspiration levels implied by Slote's conception of satisficing.

transforming this case into *Resource plenitude*), a subjective-threshold welfare sufficientarian is bound to say that we should be indifferent between giving any amount of resources to Alice, Brian or Charlie, even though Charlie is in a position where he has no resources at all.[17]

Secondly, consider the response which a specific type of objective-threshold welfare sufficientarian, namely one who is committed to the headcount claim would provide to the case at hand. Since the example is one of resource scarcity, we will assume that not all individuals can be raised to the threshold with the resources available. Consider therefore that the objective welfare threshold is set at 20. The type of sufficientarianism in which we are interested here would then prescribe distribution D5 [Alice – 20; Brian – 0; Charlie – 20]. The reason why this is the case is that D5 is the only distribution in which two of the three individuals reach the objectively established threshold. Furthermore, if a windfall should occur, yielding 20 more resources for distribution (once again, transforming this case into *Resource plenitude*), the objective-threshold welfare sufficientarian committed to the headcount claim would state that we should be indifferent between providing any amount of resources for Alice, Brian or Charlie, since any amount of resources which we provide Brian with will not be enough for him to reach the welfare threshold, although he is in a position where he has no resources at all.[18]

[17] As one anonymous reviewer has pointed out, it might be objected that subjective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism would not necessarily entail a distribution of 0 resources for Charlie—due to the fact that he is a maximizer—but that we could instead impute an average satisficing level and set that as a distributive threshold for him. This objection is unsuccessful, however, in cases involving sufficientarian views of this type, precisely because the subjectivist manner of deriving distributive thresholds precludes attaching externally built features to it. As subjective thresholds appeal only to the preferences of the individual in question, imputing the average satisficing level (or any other form of externally produced level) amounts to a collapse into objective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism, a separate view from that which was scrutinized in this paragraph (and which will be subsequently examined).

[18] It may be worth questioning if the unappealing prescriptions offered by subjective-threshold sufficientarianism might not draw their force simply from the fact that Frankfurt's version (which I used as a standard operationalization of this type of sufficiency view) is itself committed to the headcount claim as well. If this is correct, than Frankfurt's own sufficientarian position might seem less plausible in light of the example, but other subjective-threshold sufficientarian views might be unaffected. My reply to this argument is that even if the headcount claim is dropped from subjective-threshold sufficientarianism, the view simply cannot accommodate individuals who do not have contentment levels regarding the distribution of resources (this is perhaps most vivid in the case which Frankfurt himself discusses, that of monetary resources). If a person does not have a contentment level (at least in the weaker sense proposed by Frankfurt), then prioritarian or other types of arrangements for distributions under the threshold simply cannot count her in the distribution, at least while there are still other individuals that might reach their thresholds. The subjective-threshold view is therefore committed at a much deeper level than any other sufficientarian view examined here to make homogeneous

What do these two responses, derived from different normative principles, have in common? In both cases, one person appears to be significantly disadvantaged by the distribution, since she is up to a point entitled to no resources whatsoever and only after a certain point (where all others have reached the sufficiency thresholds) she has claims which are on par with the other subjects of the distribution, but not more pressing, even when she is at a miserable level of welfare and the others are at a blissful level. This result appears to be deeply at odds with some basic moral claims. To illustrate this, consider for instance Dworkin's *principle of equal importance*, according to which government should "adopt laws and policies that insure that its citizens fate are [...] insensitive to who they otherwise are—their economic backgrounds, gender, race, or particular sets of skills and handicaps" (Dworkin 2000: 6). I take this ethical principle to be relatively uncontroversial, since it expresses a more generic impartiality condition which has been a staple of the literature on distributive justice within the past decades[19]. If we take the principle of equal importance seriously, then the distributions prescribed by both welfarist subjective-threshold sufficientarians and objective-threshold sufficientarians committed to the headcount claim appear to be problematic as they assign *unequal* importance to individuals based on an internal characteristic, namely the type of rationality that they hold, which is morally arbitrary.[20] The unequal treatment of maximizing individuals in subjective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism and the unequal treatment of satisficing individuals who cannot reach the aspiration levels set in objective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism committed to the headcount claim, therefore count as serious objections against them.

assumptions regarding the rationality of individuals, since the existence of maximizers not only renders this view morally implausible but it raises a challenge to the coherence of the view as a whole.

[19] See however the critical position adopted by Steinhoff (2014) against the ideas of equal concern and respect, which implicitly encompasses a criticism of the Dworkinian principle of equal importance.

[20] I do not mean to suggest that some forms of satisficing would not perhaps be desirable in some cases. But I maintain that there are at least two arguments in defence of the claim that satisficient individuals warrant no special priority in the distribution of resources. The first one concerns the possibility that satisficers are in fact not always moderate, since moderation is not necessarily connected to satisficing (as Schmidtz 2004 shows). If the aspiration level of an individual would be so high that reaching it would require a drainage of resources which could otherwise be distributed to maximizers in order that they reach a decent level of welfare, than it seems clear that we should not give any sort of priority to the satisficing individual. Further, if we consider satisficing and maximization as actual behavioral features (and not simply useful assumptions for theory-building), it is questionable to what extent they are traceable to individual choices and it would seem more likely that they are not. Therefore, it would be highly controversial to punish or reward individuals for being endowed with a trait for the formation of which they can claim no responsibility.

6. *A resilient competitor: Crisp's sufficientarian view*

Let us now examine how a distinct version of sufficientarianism, i.e. one which proposes an objective welfare threshold but is at the same time not committed to the headcount claim, would respond to cases such as *Resource plenitude* and *Resource scarcity*. Since Crisp's (2003) formulation of the sufficiency view meets both demands,[21] I will take his version as the standard-bearer for this type of sufficientarianism. What would such a view entail in the case of *Resource plenitude*? Assume, again, that the objective threshold is set at 20. First, since the view endorses prioritarianism below the threshold, all other things being equal, it would sequentially raise each individual with one unit of welfare until all of them reach the level 10. Up to this point, 30 resources have been distributed, so 30 units remain. Since Brian no longer gains any further utility after having 10 resources, the next 20 units would be distributed sequentially to Alice and Charlie, until both of them reach the sufficiency threshold. Finally, the remaining 10 resources are distributed between Alice and Charlie, since no further distribution towards Brian would manage to raise him over the threshold. If we follow Crisp's (2003: 758) suggestion that utilitarianism would be a plausible pattern for distribution over the threshold, all possible distributions of the last 10 resources to Alice and Charlie are equally preferable. The distribution prescribed by Crisp's sufficientarian view would therefore be either D2 [Alice – 25, Brian – 10; Charlie – 25], D3 [Alice – 30; Brian – 10; Charlie – 20] or some other version which distributes between 20 and 30 resources for Alice and Charlie and 10 resources for Brian. Thus, Crisp's view avoids violating the principle of personal good, since it considers that both D2 and D3 are preferable to D1, and at the same avoids destroying benefits, since it does not give more resources to Brian than he can convert into welfare.

Let us now see how Crisp's sufficientarianism fares in the *Resource scarcity* case. It once again begins by sequentially distributing one resource to each of the three individuals until all of them reach a level of 10 welfare. Since Brian no longer derives any utility from receiving more resources, the final 10 resources to be distributed are then equally allocated to Alice and Charlie, resulting in D6 [Alice – 15; Brian – 10; Charlie – 15]. This is because the threshold is set too high for all individuals to reach it and below the threshold, inequalities are to be arranged in a prioritarian manner. Thus, since we attach more weight to the distributive claims of individuals the lower their welfare levels are, we cannot proceed with distributing one more unit to an individual who is better-off, while there is still one individual who is worse-off and could be made better-off. This grounds both our reasons to distribute an equal amount of resources to all individuals until they reach level 10

[21] As it prescribes an objective threshold at the level where an impartial spectator would no longer feel compassion for the individual in question and it prescribes a prioritarian distribution below the threshold.

and our reasons not to distribute any more resources to Brian after this level, since he can no longer be made better-off. A theory which claims that D6 should be enacted instead of either D4 [Alice – 30; Brian – 10; Charlie – 0] or D5 [Alice – 20; Brian – 0; Charlie – 20] in the case of *Resource scarcity* has great intuitive appeal since it avoids violating the principle of equal importance. It does not punish or otherwise mistreat either Charlie (who in D4 would have received nothing) for being a maximizer, or Brian (who in D5 would have received nothing) for being a satisficer. Taking this into consideration, an objective-threshold welfare sufficientarian theory which is committed to prioritarianism below the threshold (of which Crisp's view would be a classical example), is in a position to provide a better reply to cases such as *Resource plenitude* and *Resource scarcity* than resource sufficientarianism, subjective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism or objective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism committed to the headcount claim are able to do.

7. *Conclusions*

The sufficiency view has drawn a considerable amount of attention in the literature on distributive justice in the past two decades, albeit much less than firmly established rivals such as the egalitarian and, more recently, prioritarian views. In this paper, I sought to open a new line of criticism as well as comparison between sufficiency views, which has been until this point unexplored, namely what sort of responses will sufficientarian theories offer to cases where individuals act on the basis of different conceptions of rationality. In order to construct a plausible view of the way in which individuals might be differentially rational, I appealed to the classical notion of a maximizing behavior on the one hand and the notion of Slotean satisficing on the other. I then assessed the responses provided by four different types of sufficiency views in cases based on these different accounts of rationality. The conclusions drawn in this article support objective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism committed to a prioritarian distribution under the threshold, the classical version of such a theory being that of Crisp, which I claim responds correctly to both cases presented. By contrast, I argue that resource sufficientarianism offers the wrong response to cases such as *Resource plenitude*, since it violates the principle of personal good, while allowing for benefits to be wasted rather than distributed, and both subjective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism and objective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism committed to the headcount claim offer the wrong response to cases such as *Resource scarcity*, since they violate, in opposite fashions, the principle of equal importance. It is, of course, possible to either object to these conclusions, by claiming that the principle of personal good or the principle of equal importance are simply not morally salient, or that there may be other implications of objective-threshold welfare sufficientarianism committed to prioritarianism below the threshold that might prove, on balance, more

problematic.[22] It is also possible to reduce the force of my objections by accommodating them within the framework of the criticized views through an appeal to value pluralism, in order to avoid violations of the above mentioned principles. Regardless, the article still provides a strong reason[23] in favour of Crisp's (and similarly constructed) version of sufficientarianism against other types of sufficiency views, e.g. those of Frankfurt and Orr, as they presently stand.

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[22] For instance, an anonymous reviewer has argued that Frankfurt's (1987: 30) original case, which motivated his dissatisfaction with egalitarianism, constitutes a serious challenge to Crisp's version of sufficientarianism. The case can be summed up as follows: A population consisting of 10 individuals lives in a situation of extreme poverty. There are 40 units of a certain resource (e.g. food or medicine) available for distribution amongst the population. Any individual that does not get at least 5 units of the respective resource will die. At first sight it might appear that a commitment of prioritarianism below the threshold would require that we distribute 4 resources to each individual, which would ultimately result in everyone dying. This implication, might be claimed, is more damaging for Crisp's view than the counterexamples offered here against alternative views. But a closer examination of what exactly a commitment to prioritarianism under the threshold would entail precludes such a conclusion. Since in any of its standard versions prioritarianism is welfarist in respect to the currency of justice, it would not endorse a distribution whereby at best, no utility is to be gained by anyone (if we consider that the utility output for death is 0) or at worst generates disutility for everyone (if we consider that the utility output for death is negative). Thus, much like Casal's (2007: 307–308) rejection of Frankfurt's claim that egalitarianism would imply an equal distribution of resources in this case, we can also reject the claim that prioritarianism below the threshold would imply an equal distribution of resources, since the state of affairs reached would be worse for at least some individuals without benefitting anyone (a violation of the principle of personal good which prioritarianism *cannot* conceptually make). Instead, prioritarianism under the threshold requires that in this case six individuals (presumably selected after a fair procedure) be brought to the threshold of survival, identically to Frankfurt's sufficientarian view.

[23] Even if not necessarily decisive.

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