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Sufficiency and the Distribution of Burdens²

A common objection to sufficientarianism is that it allows large inequalities above the threshold. A sharpened form of this objection highlights that this indifference also encompasses large inequalities in the distribution of burdens. Consider the burdens that follow from climate change. A theory that does not rule out placing these burdens on the worst off (of the sufficiently well off) will appear implausible to many. This paper assesses ways of addressing this objection and defends a revised conception of sufficientarianism that can demand fair distribution of burdens (and benefits) above the sufficiency threshold, without giving up core sufficientarian theoretical commitments.

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² Acknowledgements: This paper was presented at the Nordic Network for Political theory in Tromsø in 2022, and at the PPE seminar at the Institute for Futures Studies in Stockholm in 2022. I am grateful to Kim Angell, Krister Bykvist, Naima Chahboun, Jakob Elster, Göran Duus-Otterström, Hilary Greaves, Fredrik Dybfest Hjorthen, Karim Jebari, Julia Mosquera, Frank Nullmeier, Daniel Ramöller, Thomas Schramme, Jørn Sønderholm, Jens Damgaard Thaysen, Olle Torpman, and two anonymous reviewers for very helpful comments

1. Introduction

Distributive justice typically concerns the just distribution of various kinds of *goods*.³ If we know which goods are relevant for justice, we can divide them up according to the most plausible distributive principle. If you are an egalitarian, you will distribute the relevant goods equally. If you are a sufficientarian, you will distribute them so as to maximize the number of people that reach the sufficiency threshold, or to minimize the amount of insufficiency (that is the (morally weighted) aggregate shortfall from the threshold).⁴

Distributive justice also, arguably, concerns the distribution of *burdens*. Burdens can come in many forms but I will mainly be concerned with the kind of burdens that are in some sense unavoidable, regardless of whether or not they are ultimately caused or imposed by human agency. More particularly, consider burdens that are like the burdens that follow from climate change. Climate change already causes harm to many and will continuously and increasingly do so in the foreseeable future. Temperatures will increase, sea levels will rise, deserts will spread, contagious diseases will become more common, millions will be forced to flee their homes, and so on.

These burdens will most likely fall unevenly and unfairly on people if nothing is done to secure a fair distribution (Caney 2010). Note that the term *burdens* is here used in a special sense. I assume that burdens are to a large extent fungible and sharable. To be sure, for a small island state disappearing into the rising sea, it may not make sense to think of that (gigantic) loss as fungible and sharable. Nonetheless, there are things that others can do to share this burden at least to some extent. The islanders can be provided with a new territory, they can be compensated financially, granted entry to other states, and so on. I do not claim that the loss of a territory can be fully compensated, or that the burdens associated with such a loss can be shared in full, but I take it that it can be shared to a large degree.⁵

More generally, I assume that most burdens following from climate change can be shared, in some way or the other, either at the mitigation stage, at the adaptation stage, or at the compensation stage (if and when adaptation in some sense is no

³ In this paper, I will use ‘goods’ as a placeholder for whatever it is that we think should be distributed justly.

⁴ Views that imply maximizing sufficiency (Frankfurt 1989) have the troubling implication that if everyone is very badly off, it is better to have one person reach the threshold, than to have everyone *almost* reach it (Casal 2008). I will for that reason set such maximizing versions aside for the rest of the paper.

⁵ Caney 2014 distinguishes between harm avoidance and burden sharing, because sometimes harms must be avoided immediately, before a scheme of burden sharing is in place. I am here, as suggested above, concerned with how to share those burdens fairly. I thus leave the ethics of harm avoidance to one side.

longer possible, such as in cases of lost territory). This is in line with most writings on climate justice (Caney 2005, 2010, 2014, Page 2008, Jagers and Duus-Otterström 2008, Gosseries 2003).

Further, it seems clear that these burdens should be distributed fairly. There are many discussions of burden sharing in relation to climate change. Since climate change is largely caused by human agency, several of the principles that are discussed are principles of *corrective* justice, that is principles that are invoked when some moral agent has inflicted harm, violated a duty, or in other ways incurred particular obligations to contribute to the rectification of a wrong. In the literature, the polluter pays principle (PPP) and the beneficiary pays principle (BPP) have both been extensively debated.

The PPP, as the name suggests, holds that those who are responsible for polluting should pay the cost, or take on the burdens, that follow from their emissions. This principle, then, can be seen as a corollary to a form of harm principle, according to which one should compensate for the harm one has inflicted, in this case through pollution (Caney 2005, Page 2008).

The BPP, on the other hand, has it that those who have benefited, even innocently, from injustice (or sometimes harm), have special duties to compensate those that have been harmed by the injustice, in this case pollution (Caney 2005, Page 2008, Haydar and Øverland 2015). However, for various reasons (dead polluters, innocent pollution, the non-identity problem, natural climate change) principles of corrective justice, justifiable or not as such, do not apply to (anything near) the total burden that follows from climate change (Caney 2005; 2010). A substantial portion of this burden, then, must therefore be distributed in a more general and perhaps consequentialist fashion, similarly to burdens that are not caused by human agency, for instance (pure) natural disasters. The ability to pay principle (APP) is one such suggestion. According to this principle the (remaining) burdens that follow from climate change should be distributed in light of the relevant agents' capability to shoulder them (Caney 2010).

Other principles that are discussed in the broader literature on distributive justice, are more general, and not limited to corrective justice (PPP and BPP) or the burdens that remain after principles of corrective justice have been applied (APP). These more general theories, such as egalitarianism, prioritarianism, utilitarianism, sufficientarianism, and limitarianism may also be applied to climate change. Some (versions) of these have little or no place for corrective principles such as PPP and BPP (for instance total utilitarianism and total prioritarianism). Others, such as for instance forms of egalitarianism and sufficientarianism, are compatible with them, but will be competitors to APP (which, as noted, applies to the portion of the burden that cannot be assigned in light of more standard corrective principles).

In my view, *sufficientarianism* is a promising theory of distributive justice in many respects. Sufficientarianism, in most renditions, defines a threshold that signifies a level of goods that it is morally important that people reach, and rejects further distributive principles above that threshold. However, sufficientarianism faces a quite serious objection - the indifference objection - according to which this theory allows large, potentially extremely large, inequalities above the threshold (Casal 2008, Knight 2022).⁶ A sharpened form of the indifference objection points to the fact that sufficientarianism is also unable to distribute *burdens* (those that are not distributable in light of PPP or BPP, to the extent that the version of sufficientarianism in question is compatible with these principles) in a fair manner. This objection is problematic not least in the context of climate change, where burden sharing comes into particularly sharp focus. Many agree that a theory that is unable to distribute the burdens of climate change fairly, is implausible. Thus, it would significantly strengthen sufficientarianism if the burden objection could be met.

This paper assesses different ways of addressing the burden objection (some of which, by extension, also addresses the indifference objection in its entirety), and defends a revised conception of sufficientarianism that requires fair distribution of burdens (and benefits) above the sufficiency threshold, but without giving up core sufficientarian theoretical commitments. Thus, the aim is to strengthen sufficientarianism, and in that way support the theory. The aim is not to undermine or criticize other theories, or to assess the extent to which sufficientarianism is overall more plausible than its rivals.

2. Sufficientarianism and the Burden Objection

Sufficientarianism comes in many different forms (Axelsen and Nielsen 2015, Benbaji 2005, Crisp 2003, Frankfurt 1987, Huseby 2010, 2020, Shields 2011, 2016, Timmer 2022),⁷ but I will for the time being just assume a simple version, according to which there is a threshold of goods such that it is especially important that people reach it. Above this threshold, no further principles of distributive justice apply. These two claims correspond to sufficientarianism's positive thesis (PT) and negative thesis (NT), respectively (Casal 2007).

⁶ This objection is sometimes presented in terms of the distribution of benefits, in particular (Casal 2007), and sometimes in terms of distribution above the threshold in general (Knight 2022). The latter version encompasses the former version as well as the burden objection (see below).

⁷ Sufficientarianism has also been subject to a range of criticisms and objections that will not be addressed here. For further discussion, see Arneson 2005, Casal 2008, Herlitz 2018, Knight 2022, Nielsen 2016, Segall 2016, Widerquist 2010.

PT: There is a level of goods such that it is especially morally important that people reach it.

NT: There is a level of goods such that above it, no distribution is unjust.

The negative thesis might cause some trouble for sufficientarians. Suppose everyone is above the threshold, but that there is inequality between two groups. One group is just above the threshold, say, and another group is substantially above it. For simple illustration, suppose the threshold is at 10, that the worst-off group is at 11, the best-off group is at 21, and that there are equally many individuals in each group.

In light of NT, this situation does not give rise to any claims of redistribution in the name of justice. So long as everyone is sufficiently well off, everything is fine, distribution-wise. As indicated, many critics find this objectionable in itself (hence the indifference objection). Worse still, however, suppose that some substantial burden presents itself. This burden is similar to that portion of the burden of climate change that cannot be distributed in light of any plausible corrective principles of justice (such as PPP or BPP). Thus, there is no morally salient connection between the agents and the burden that give any of them particular duties to shoulder it. None of them have caused the burden, and none of them will benefit from its landing on others.⁸ We can further assume that, for some reason, we can only distribute this burden in one of two ways. Either we can place it on the worst off, or we can place it on the best off. For illustration, consider a simplified world in which the remainder (the part of the climate change burden that cannot be distributed in light of corrective principles of justice) will land on the worst off if nothing is done. Even if they are the worst off, however, we assume that they are still sufficiently well off by a relatively slim margin. A sustained effort on the part of the best off will protect the worst off from this burden, but this effort will be relatively costly. The best off are, however, (financially) more than capable of taking it on. In both cases, the cost equals one unit of goods per person, such that either the worst off end up with 10, that is, exactly at the threshold, or the best off end up with 20, that is, less than they used to have, but still quite a lot and still well above the threshold.

In this case, it seems that it would be wrong to place the burden on the worst off, even if they are sufficiently well off. Presumably, many sufficientarians would

⁸ I make this specification because sufficientarianism, as mentioned, may well be compatible with principles of corrective justice, such as the BPP. Note that even if a general distributive theory may be compatible with principles of corrective justice, conflicts between them can still arise in specific circumstances. Thus, some sort of priority or weighting will be required.

agree.⁹ To be sure, sufficientarianism does not imply that we *ought to* burden the worst off, but the theory is in most versions *indifferent* between burdening the worst off and burdening the best off (so long as all remain sufficiently well off). Worse still, standard sufficientarianism is indifferent between burdening the worst off, and not burdening *anyone*. If, for some reason, we can avoid an impending catastrophe either by substantially burdening the worst off, or by costlessly pushing a button, it is hard to see what reasons we have *qua* sufficientarians, to just push the button.¹⁰

This apparent inability of sufficientarianism to rule out forms of intuitively unjust (sometimes *very* unjust) ways of sharing burdens, including, it has been claimed, regressive taxation, is a very forceful objection to the theory (Kanschick 2015, Nielsen 2019). Burdening the worst off simply goes against the grain of what most people associate with the very concept of justice. Letting the worst off take the cost for avoiding harm to all, would in a sense be similar to taking from the poor (relatively speaking) and giving to the rich.¹¹

Nielsen (2019) contrasts two cases that bring out the normative difference between what he refers to as the benefit-driven and the burden-driven versions of the indifference objection. In the *Manna from heaven* case, the imaginary island *Plentia* comprises a population in which everyone is sufficiently well off, but one third - the rich - are much better off than the rest. Then, some act of nature occurs that makes the rich even better off than they were, without affecting the remaining two thirds (Nielsen 2019: 27). In the *Manna from Hell* case, on the other hand, the act of nature makes the non-rich worse off than they were, even if they remain sufficiently well off, while leaving the rich unaffected (Nielsen 2019: 31).

According to Nielsen, the latter case appears more unjust than the former, even though the resulting inequality is the same (we can assume), and even if the worst off remain sufficiently well off. One reason might be that it is easier to imagine the

⁹ Some sufficientarians might not find it problematic to place an unavoidable burden on the worst off rather than the best off, when everyone is sufficiently well off. These sufficientarians will, faced with the burden objection (and the indifference objection) simply bite the bullet. I assume that this is the minority position.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Göran Duus-Otterström for suggesting this point.

¹¹ Note that PT might also have some potentially counter-intuitive implications. Suppose prioritarianism is applied below it (as is the case for several sufficientarian theories). If so, a burden might have to be placed on the worst off in cases where the total (morally weighted) disutility of doing so is less than the total (morally weighted) disutility of placing it on the best off (of those who are under the threshold). This is similar to the implications of ordinary prioritarianism. The difference is that ordinary prioritarianism will balance benefits and burdens among individuals *regardless* of whether they are above or below some sufficientarian threshold. I will not address this potential problem for PT here, but I do think that this is a smaller problem than the one raised by NT, because in the latter case, as noted above, the worst off can in principle be burdened even if the total disutility of doing so is *less* than burdening the better off. In addition, applying prioritarianism below PT, while problematic in some cases, is the most plausible alternative to applying leximin, which would raise other severe problems.

non-rich two-thirds being unmoved by others good luck, than with their own bad luck (Nielsen 2019: 31). I agree, and the contrast comes out even starker in cases where the worst (but sufficiently well) off must shoulder a burden in order to benefit all. Suppose a flood is threatening the whole of *Plentia*, and that expensive flood walls must be built. It would not appear unjust to let the rich one third take this cost. Sharing the cost among all might also be acceptable. But placing the whole cost on the worst off seems manifestly unjust.

I agree then, with Kanschick (2015), Nielsen (2029), and others, that the burden objection is even more forceful than the indifference objection, and moreover, that it is likely to be the most challenging objection to sufficientarianism altogether. As noted, it seems to me that the burdens following from climate change underscores this view. It is more pressing to avoid that these burdens harm the worst off, even when they are sufficiently well off, than to generally reduce inequalities above the threshold.

Some attempts have been made at addressing this issue (Huseby 2010, Kanschick 2015), but it is unclear how successful these attempts are, and the question clearly merits further discussion. It should be noted, however, that my proposed answer to the burden objection (unlike some of the alternatives I discuss along the way) does not at all *depend* on the assumption that it is worse than the indifference objection.

The burden objection (and the indifference objection more generally) presents sufficientarianism with a dilemma of sorts. Either sufficientarianism cannot meet the objection, and is, for that reason, implausible, or sufficientarianism can meet the objection, but only at the cost of rejecting NT, and thus losing its distinctiveness (to an extent at least). The idea behind the second horn, is that meeting the objection requires the acceptance of some further non-sufficientarian distributive principle above the threshold, something that NT seems to explicitly deny. And to the extent that one agrees with Casal (2003) that sufficientarianism is distinctive partly in virtue of accepting NT, the second horn follows.

To be sure, the second horn is only problematic to the extent that sufficientarians think NT is valuable, but it seems that many do. There are various reasons why that may be the case, but in my view (which I will elaborate below), NT is valuable because it (on some versions at least) points to a threshold such that below it, people have *absolute* priority over those above it. This blocks certain forms of aggregation, including aggregation that allows many small benefits to the very well off to outweigh a few large burdens to the very badly off. (This kind of aggregation, moreover, is what many see as the main problem with theories such as utilitarianism and prioritarianism.)

There are at least three ways of addressing this issue. The first is to deny the force

of the burden objection. I will not pursue that alternative here. It seems, as I have suggested throughout, that the objection is very forceful indeed, and that sufficientarianism will be strengthened to the extent that it is able to meet it, rather than just bite the (distasteful) bullet.

Another way out of the dilemma is to argue (as some have argued), that there are *instrumental* reasons to distribute burdens fairly or progressively, even above the threshold. Instrumental reasons in this context, are reasons that do not flow from intrinsically valuable distributive principles, such as equality or priority (or sufficientarianism), for instance. If, say, inequalities above the threshold tended to threaten the long-term sufficiency of the worse off, or if inequalities above the threshold tended to undermine social stability (and hence sufficiency) we would have such instrumental reasons not to place burdens on the worst off (and also not to benefit the better off). Redistribution from the better off to the worse off above the threshold would not be intrinsically good (as many egalitarians would claim). Rather, equalizing would be instrumentally good in virtue of securing sufficiency over the long term, which (on this account) would be intrinsically good. I will consider some attempts along these lines in section 3 below.

A third possibility is to *redefine* NT in such a way that it allows for further distributive principles. I will consider and defend such an alternative (in section 4 below). More specifically, as suggested above, I will propose that we can restate NT in such a way that it allows further distributive principles above the threshold, but without thereby undermining the distinctiveness of sufficientarianism.¹² This restatement is based on the observation that NT really serves two purposes in most sufficientarian theories. First, it marks out the threshold above which no further distributive principles apply. Second it marks out the threshold at which those below it have *absolute* priority over those above (Huseby 2020). The latter purpose, importantly, is not in conflict with additional principles above the threshold, and it is sufficient to retain the distinctiveness of sufficientarianism, or so I argue. Moreover, the latter purpose is not dependent on the first, so that sufficientarians may well accept absolute priority below the threshold while accepting further distributive principles above. This solution, if successful, could meet both the burden objection, and the indifference objection more generally, because allowing additional distributive principles above the threshold would work equally well for benefits as for burdens.¹³

¹² Shields' shift-sufficientarianism (2016) can be seen as an attempt along similar lines. According to Shields, there is a threshold such that it is especially important that people reach it, but above that threshold, it might still be valuable to benefit people, but at a slower rate. The threshold thus marks a 'shift,' and Shields consequently rejects NT rather than redefine it. Crisp's version of sufficientarianism (2003) is probably compatible with my proposal. However, since he applies (or at least suggests) utilitarianism above the threshold, his view is unlikely to rule out all instances of *unfairness*.

¹³ An alternative could be to show that there is a morally relevant *asymmetry* between the distribution of

3. Instrumental Reasons for Fair Burden Sharing

As noted, some attempts have been made to meet the burden objection by referring to instrumental reasons. Consider again the case above, where a burden could be distributed so as to either reduce the level of half the population from 21 to 20, or from 11 to 10 for the other half, and where 10 equals the sufficiency threshold. Sufficiencyarians could reasonably argue that laying the burden upon the worst off is objectionable because it makes half the population (even more) *vulnerable to insufficiency*, because they are after they have paid the cost of the burden just *barely* sufficiently well off (Kanschick 2015).

One problem with this, as an answer to the burden objection, is that it is less persuasive in cases in which half are at, say, 19 and the other half at 30.¹⁴ Placing the burden on the worst off and reducing their level of wellbeing to 18 hardly puts them at risk of insufficiency. Of course, in most realistic scenarios, being at 18 makes one *more* vulnerable to insufficiency than being at 29, but not necessarily to any significant extent. In addition, it will, in principle, always be a contingent matter how vulnerable a person is to become insufficiently well off. Even if there is, empirically, a strong correlation between one's level of goods and one's vulnerability to insufficiency, the relationship will simply not hold in all cases (something that Kanschick explicitly acknowledges).

Now, consider the argument that we have instrumental reasons to avoid *large inequalities* (Scanlon 2018). If so, we would have reasons to avoid placing burdens on the worst off (of the sufficiently well off). There could be several possible reasons why inequalities are instrumentally bad, also from a sufficiencyarian point of view. For instance, inequalities could over time undermine social solidarity, or increase conflict.¹⁵

This argument, to the extent that it is empirically correct, seems perfectly fine, but it is not sufficiently general. If one group is at 19 and the other at 20, the inequality will not necessarily become large or problematic just by reducing the

burdens and goods. After all, the burden objection seems to presuppose something like that. If asymmetry turns out to be plausible, it appears that sufficiencyarians would be free to distribute burdens in a principled way, above the threshold, in light of some non-sufficiencyarian principle (for instance equality or priority), without thereby denying (the original) NT completely. That is, (the original) NT could still hold for the distribution of *benefits*. I leave this alternative to one side here, however, because it seems all in all better to be able to meet both the burden objection and the indifference objection.

¹⁴ To be sure, when the worst off are at such a high level, the intuitions might change, and the burden objection might appear less problematic. As noted, however, I assume that most would find the burden objection problematic (which is compatible with thinking that it is more problematic the lower the level of the worst off).

¹⁵ Instrumental reasons might come in many different versions, and some may be stronger than others. Here, I just assume, for the sake of argument, that there are some weighty instrumental (non-sufficiencyarian) reasons that can be invoked in order to avoid placing burdens on the worst off.

level of the worst off by one, to 18. (To be sure, this will depend on the facts that obtain in the different contexts). Also, if a third of the population is at 20, a third at 25, and a third at 30, it is not clear that the instrumental concern for equality is sufficient to rule out placing the burdens on the middle group.

Another possibility is to refer to relative deprivation (Huseby 2010). If the sufficiency threshold is specified (at least in part) with reference to subjective contentment, it could be the case that inequalities above the threshold are problematic because they (actually) lead to insufficiency, via relative deprivation. Suppose the current sufficiency level is at 10. A is at 15, and all others are at 20. If a burden is then placed on A, such that she ends up at 10, it could be the case that 10 is no longer sufficient, because A will (reasonably) evaluate her level of goods at least partly, in light of what levels of goods others have. (Even if, say, 10 would have been sufficient if everyone else was also at 10, or only A was at 10, but all others were at 12). This argument too, however, lacks generality. Whether or not people experience relative deprivation is essentially a contingent question.

I do not want to deny that instrumental arguments of this kind can be plausible, and successful in avoiding many actual forms of seemingly unfair burden-sharing. However, these arguments are, as indicated, contingent, and they are not general enough to rule out all cases of apparently unfair burden sharing. It would clearly be better to have a more general and principled argument in favor of fair burden sharing above the threshold.

It is also worth emphasizing that the solutions based on instrumental reasons have another flaw, in addition to their contingency and lack of generality. They all fail to meet the burden objection in a satisfactory way. The objection holds that some forms of distribution of burdens above the sufficiency threshold is *unfair*. The answers discussed above attempt to show that such unfair distributions will seldom be called for. But they fall short of deeming them unfair as such. Thus, even if they were more general and less contingent, they would still fail to answer the objection in a completely adequate manner.

4. Redefining the Negative Thesis

In my view, the best way for sufficientarians to handle the burden problem, is to redefine NT and accept a certain form of pluralism. This solution is to some extent foreshadowed in the literature, but has so far not been explicitly used to address the fairness of burden sharing (see Crisp 2003, Casal 2007: 300).

Consider NT as it has ordinarily been presented in the literature. According to Casal, the negative thesis ‘denies the relevance of certain additional distributive requirements’ above the sufficiency threshold (2007:298). Later on, she suggests

that it is in particular equality and priority that sufficientarians reject (2007: 299), but that sufficientarians tend to, and have reason to, reject other principles as well. For my purposes, this understanding of the negative thesis can be completely general and encompass all further distributive requirements.¹⁶ Thus defined, the negative thesis conforms to the specification given above:

NT: There is a level of goods such that above it, no distribution is unjust.¹⁷

On this definition, neither benefits nor burdens can be distributed in light of some (intrinsic) principle of fairness above the threshold, since no distribution above the threshold can be unjust. Unless a sufficiently general instrumental argument can be given for why we should prioritize the better off over the worse off, the choice between progressive and regressive taxation, for instance, remains a mere toss-up.

Thus, we should consider alternatives. One option would be to emphasize not the rejection of other principles, but, as I have already indicated, the *priority* of those below the threshold, over those above (Huseby 2020:211). The point is that on many sufficiency views, the negative threshold has two distinct functions. The first is the one associated with NT above, that is to deny the relevance of further distributive principles. The second is to assert absolute priority to those below the threshold over those above.¹⁸

It is only the first of these functions that make sufficientarianism vulnerable to the burden objection. The second does not. Also, the second, while in my view important, is not strictly speaking implied by NT as stated. In light of this, I suggest the following, alternative, version of NT:

NTa: There is a level of goods such that those below it have absolute priority over those above it.

There are some things to note here. First, one might think that the absolute priority to those below the threshold is a feature of *PT*, rather than *NT*. In Casal's (and for that matter, others') formulation, that is not the case. Recall,

¹⁶ But note that this does not exclude catering to deontological concerns such as respect for individuals (see Frankfurt 1989, Casal 2007).

¹⁷ For a different formulation, see Shields 2012:103.

¹⁸ Note that Limitarianism also implies a version of the negative thesis. According to this theory (in at least some renditions) it is impermissible to have goods above a certain threshold (Robeyns 2017). Limitarianism and sufficientarianism are, however, distinct theories.

PT: There is a level of goods such that it is especially important that people reach it.

PT can be specified in different ways, however, as pointed out by, among others, Casal (2007). For instance, it *can* imply absolute priority or (merely) strong priority to those below the threshold. Some sufficientarians have defended absolute priority (Crisp 2003, Frankfurt 1987, Huseby 2010), whereas others have defended non-absolute versions (Axelsen and Nielsen 2015:418, Shields 2011:107). Now, suppose one defends an absolute version of PT:

PTa: There is a level of goods such that it is especially important that people reach it. People below it have absolute priority over people above it.

Thus defined, PTa seems to *entail* the alternative understanding of NT above.¹⁹ So, for sufficientarians that are not terribly concerned with outright denying the possibility of further distributive concerns above the threshold, an absolutist understanding of PT would in fact be enough to define a recognizable and distinct sufficientarian position.

To be sure, some have claimed that sufficientarianism proper implies a commitment to both theses. But it seems that any position that holds an absolutist version of PT (PTa) would be distinctly sufficientarian (admittedly, partly in virtue of entailing NTa). After all, no other familiar distributive principle gives absolute priority to all who are below a sufficiency threshold. But it would of course be easier to *combine* such versions with further principles above the threshold, than forms of sufficientarianism that embrace both theses, at least to the extent that NT is understood in Casal's manner.

However, if NT is understood as primarily stressing absolute priority (that is, NTa), forms of sufficientarianism that accept both theses can accept further principles as well. One might wonder, however, why one would accept NTa in the first place, if one already accepts an absolutist version of PT. That could seem superfluous. As I will argue next, there could be reasons for accepting NTa, but it is worth emphasizing that both possibilities would have the resources to meet the burdens-objection.

If we suppose that the two theses (however defined) refer to the *same* threshold, then it would indeed be superfluous to assert both PTa and NTa. PTa would define

¹⁹ Furthermore, PT could be expressed identically to NTa. PTa/NTa: There is a level of goods such that those below it have absolute priority over those above it. This would be less informative, but still comprehensible. As I note in the main text, however, we have reasons to prefer to keep the two theses distinct.

the threshold *and* assert the absolute priority of those below it over those above it. To accept, *in addition*, NTa, which just repeats part of what is already asserted by PTa would serve no interesting purpose. However, if we assume that the two theses refer to *different* thresholds, the picture changes (Huseby 2020). In that case there is a need for an additional and distinct NTa, referring to a higher threshold.²⁰ Such a view is compatible with either a version of PT or PTa.²¹

Such a two-threshold view is compatible both with NTa and the original NT, but only versions accepting NTa could successfully meet the burden objection. To clarify, this view says

- a) there is a level of goods such that it is especially morally important that people reach it,
- b) there is a (distinct and higher) level of goods such that those below it have absolute priority over those above it.²²

Interestingly, a) and b) are compatible with

- c) above the higher threshold, equality (or priority) applies.

This would be a hybrid view, to be sure, but it would be distinctly sufficientarian nonetheless, in virtue of accepting NTa. (As noted the same can be said for alternatives that accept PTa.)

It seems then, that both versions (PTa, and PT plus NTa) can successfully avoid the objection from the distribution of burdens. (I happen to think that the latter version (PT plus NTa) is more plausible for other reasons but will not argue for that conclusion here.)²³ Since both are compatible with c) they can easily be combined

²⁰ There are, however, conceivable alternatives. For instance, there could be several PTa's and/or several NTa's. It will lead too far to canvass all possibilities here. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

²¹ In principle, I assume that NTa could refer to a lower threshold, but I will not consider that alternative here.

²² Note that this priority is intended to cover cases in which some individuals are at or just above the threshold, and risk falling below it, if some policy is implemented. These individuals would be given absolute priority over individuals who do not risk falling below. Below the threshold, more standard prioritarian reasoning apply. I am grateful for an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

²³ Note that this solution avoids one possible problem with the asymmetry thesis. According to asymmetry, burdens and benefits can be distributed in light of different principles. This might for all I have said so far be plausible, but it is hard to avoid the thought that it is difficult to maintain a conceptual distinction between the two. And even if it is possible to maintain such a distinction, some bona fide benefits might appear to be such as to call for a fair distribution. In addition, many have raised the same objection with reference to benefits (Casal 2007). Versions based on asymmetry cannot address such objections. Views that accept PTa or PT plus NTa can.

with further distributive principle above the (higher) threshold. If we suppose, for the sake of argument, that prioritarianism is chosen, burdens falling on individuals above the (higher) threshold, will be distributed in a way that prioritizes the worst off.²⁴ In addition to meeting the burdens objection, this solution also meets the indifference objection in its entirety, since this further distributive principle can apply to benefits as well as burdens. On this revised view, then, burdens in general, as well as the particular burdens following from climate change, can be distributed fairly.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have considered the burden objection to sufficientarianism. This objection holds that sufficientarianism allows unfair burden sharing. This seems problematic. In response, I have outlined a form of sufficientarianism that is immune to this objection, in virtue of accepting a redefined version of the negative thesis, that emphasizes absolute priority to those below the threshold, rather than the rejection of further distributive principles above the threshold. In my view, such a version of sufficientarianism could be a plausible general theory of distributive justice that is also readily applicable to the problem of climate change.

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²⁴ As noted above, some forms of prioritarianism allow aggregation in a way that will sometimes place the burdens on the worst off, if the morally weighted disutility of doing so outweighs the morally weighted disutility of placing it in the better off. Other versions (such as leximin) would give absolute priority to the worst off (among those above the threshold). Which version to choose, and whether to choose prioritarianism or egalitarianism are questions that fall beyond the scope of this paper.

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