

Why Justice Requires Transfers to Offset Income and Wealth Inequalities

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If an array of goods is for sale on a market, one's wealth, the tradeable resources one owns, determines what one can purchase from this array. One's income is the increment in wealth one acquires over a given period of time. In any society, we observe some people having more wealth and income, some less. At any given time, in some societies average wealth is greater than in others. Across time, we can observe societies becoming richer or poorer and showing more or less equal distributions of wealth among their members. Does it matter from an ethical standpoint whether some people have more income and wealth than others? Does securing a more equal distribution of income and wealth either constitute the achievement of something that is intrinsically morally desirable or serve as a reliable means to the achievement of some intrinsic moral value? If we suppose that justice demands equalizing the income or wealth of persons in many circumstances, what principles of justice generate this demand?

Some philosophers and social critics have made confident pronouncements in response to these questions. Writing about the distribution of money and commodities in contemporary democracies, political theorist Michael Walzer observes that insufficient income excludes a citizen from full membership in society, but the norm of democratic equality requires that all citizens should enjoy the same full membership, so by one means or another all citizens must be assured a sufficient level of money. Moreover, there are some things that money should not be able to buy: in any society, the social

meanings of particular goods rule out their exchange by sale. Votes should not be tradeable, nor the obligation to perform military service, and there are more controversial prohibited or strictly regulated exchanges. If the assurance of sufficient income and wealth guarantees full membership to all citizens, and if only those goods are for sale that should be for sale according to our shared values, then according to Walzer, “there is no such thing as a maldistribution of consumer goods. It just doesn’t matter, from the standpoint of complex equality, that you have a yacht and I don’t, or that the sound system of her hi-fi is greatly superior to his, or that we buy our rugs from Sears Roebuck and they get theirs from the Orient. People will focus on such matters, or not: that is a question of culture, not of distributive justice.”¹

This attractive sounding position comprises three claims: (1) regarding the distribution of income and wealth, what matters morally is that everyone should have enough, (2) a person has enough when poverty does not block her from being a full member of democratic society, and (3) provided everyone has enough, that some people have more income and wealth than others violates no fundamental principle of justice and morality.²

According to this doctrine, the fact that some are better off financially than others is a social justice concern only if such inequality has the effect of increasing or decreasing the number of people below the line of sufficiency (the number who do not have enough). Inequality in and of itself is not undesirable from the standpoint of justice. For that matter, that people are exactly as well off financially as others is deemed desirable or not from the standpoint of justice depending on the effects of this equality on the numbers of people who reach the sufficiency line. Walzer’s position is a version of sufficientarianism, the principle that the distribution of resources in society is just if and only if everyone has enough. As so far stated, the sufficientarian principle does not resolve the question, whether or not the distributions of income and wealth are in and of

themselves morally significant. The issue turns on how sufficiency is understood. The good enough level might be defined in noncomparative terms, in which case whether any given individual has more or less than others is not intrinsically morally significant. For example, it might be held that the good enough level is the level that enables a person to attain a stipulated amount of pleasure or degree of life plan fulfillment over the course of her life. The good enough level might instead be defined in comparative terms. For example, it might be stipulated that everyone has enough income and wealth when nobody has less than some fraction of the average level. This essay focuses on noncomparative versions of the sufficiency doctrine. My reason for doing so is that these versions are more interesting and plausible than their comparative counterparts.

Sufficientarianism attracts distinguished advocates. Philosopher Harry Frankfurt has argued forcefully for components of this doctrine.³ Philosopher Elizabeth Anderson defends a democratic equality conception of justice that develops Walzer's version of the doctrine.⁴ Philosopher Martha Nussbaum identifies the level of sufficiency with a good enough level of positive freedom. The person who has enough possesses the capability to function at an acceptable level in all of the ways that are individually necessary and together sufficient for a decent quality of human life.⁵

In a rough and ready way, the sufficientarian approach conforms to the antipoverty focus of modern governmental welfare policies. On their face, the aim of these policies tends to be to define a minimal acceptable standard of living and to prevent people from falling below this standard rather than to make the worst off as well off as possible or anything of the sort.⁶ In recent years these welfare state policies have attracted criticism, and some governments have reduced their commitment to them. But the criticism for the most part challenges the efficacy of these policies, not their normative rationale.⁷ To the extent that welfare state policies (and their replacements directed to the same goal) implement most voters' values regarding the amelioration of

poverty, we might suspect that the common sense moral views of most people are congruent with sufficientarianism.

In this essay I shall argue against the Walzerian version of sufficientarianism and also against the more general doctrine. These principles fail to provide a morally sound way of determining when justice requires forced transfers from more wealthy to less wealthy persons. I also suggest a more promising approach to the justice of transfers.

This essay assesses sufficientarianism as a candidate fundamental moral principle—a statement of what ultimately matters morally. But the sufficientarian doctrine that everyone should have enough might be proposed at a lower level of abstraction and intended to serve as a rough-and-ready public policy guide. The idea of this practical sufficiency norm would be that whatever exactly a just society is, it does not allow people to languish in readily avoidable abject misery and poverty, so we should strive to get everyone to a threshold of decent existence. If various plausible fundamental moral outlooks converge in endorsing practical sufficiency in many settings, perhaps we can be confident that this norm is sensible even if we are uncertain what fundamental moral principles should be embraced. Moreover, the advocate of the practical sufficiency norm might cheerfully allow that what counts as “enough” will vary from context to context and may not be determinable without some arbitrary specification. The reader who inclines toward interpreting the sufficiency doctrine as a practical guideline will regard my critique that follows as misplaced overkill: I am attacking a signpost as though it were a theory.

The sufficiency doctrine provides an answer to the question, when (if ever) are governmental transfers of income and wealth permitted or required by justice, only if sufficiency is construed as a fundamental moral principle. Moreover, as indicated above, political philosophers have proposed sufficiency as appropriate at this fundamental level. In this construal the doctrine is interesting and plausible and

apparently has a lot going for it. My critique of sufficiency, pitched at this fundamental level, is not attacking a view that no one defends, nor one that is on its face indefensible. Finally, some of the difficulties I locate in the sufficiency doctrine seem to me to be present also in the usage of it as a rough-and-ready guide, though I shall not develop this point in what follows.

I. THE END OF THE STORY

The discussion of sufficientarianism in this essay follows a serpentine path. It may be worthwhile indicating where it ends. This is easy to do, because my view of why justice requires transfers is simple. People's lives can go better or worse on the whole. Just transfers of distributable resources improve the lives of recipients or others indirectly affected.⁸

We should distinguish short-term and long-term effects of transfers. In the short run transferring resources away from a person usually makes the person's life go worse, if she would have used the transferred resources to her benefit. The recipient of a transfer is usually better off, depending on what she does with the resource and what she would have done without it. Transfers, especially if followed over time as predictable policy, will have effects on people's motives and behavior that might lead to desirable or undesirable outcomes in the near or long term. If income is progressively taxed to be redistributed to others, those who are subject to the tax may opt for more leisure and less productive employment, or they may seek to engage in income-producing activities beyond the reach of the tax collector. In the nineteenth century the social critic John Stuart Mill observed that in calculating the overall benefit that accrues to the recipient of transfers we should distinguish "the consequences of the assistance itself, and the consequences of relying on the assistance."⁹ The latter he deemed bad, often so bad as to bring about a net loss. Reliance on assistance he supposed to be undesirable because it inhibits the useful motive of self-help. One might imagine the

motivational effect as different: a person who is ground down by circumstances, then given the assurance of aid, gains pluck, and greater energy to make further gains. At any rate, I hold that to qualify as just, a transfer must have desirable consequences on the whole over the long run. (Right-wingers and left-wingers tend to disagree about what the long-term consequences of proposed transfers would be.)

Three factors determine the value of consequences for distributive justice purposes. It is better if a person's life goes better rather than worse. A life that goes better has higher well-being, a magnitude fixed by the objective value of the goods that an individual attains, not her subjective attitudes or opinions regarding them. Second, the lower that a person's well-being over the course of her life would be absent a benefit we could secure for her, the greater the moral value of getting a given gain in well-being for her. Third, the more one is reasonably held responsible for one's present plight by virtue of the contribution of one's voluntary choices and conduct in producing it, the less the moral value of securing a given gain in well-being (if one is being proposed as a recipient of transfer) or the greater the moral disvalue of bringing about a loss in one's current well-being prospects (if one is being proposed as a source of resources to be transferred to others). Just institutions and social practices and actions are those that maximize the moral value of consequences as measured by a scale that integrates the three factors of well-being gain, prior lifetime well-being expectation, and responsibility. This view, that accords priority to gaining benefits for the worse off and those not responsible for being worse off, is called the priority view.

To embrace this simple view of just transfers one must embrace the idea that the fact that one could act in a way that would create a benefit (avoid a loss) for another person is a reason to do it. The worse off in terms of lifetime well-being the person is, the stronger the reason to help now. Also, the strength of the reason to help can be amplified or dampened by the degree to which the person's present plight, if bad, came

about as a result of fate dealing her a bad hand rather than as a result of her negligent playing of the cards that fate has dealt her.

The simple view just adumbrated excludes many factors that might be thought to shape the moral principles that determine under what circumstances transfers are just. At the level of principle (though perhaps not at the level of practical policy), priority rules out the possibility that morality permits or requires giving special weight to the goal of ameliorating the life conditions of disadvantaged people who are fellow members of one's nation state or political community. My moral claim that someone owes me a just transfer is not strengthened just because the person happens to be a fellow citizen or community member rather than a distant stranger. Ronald Dworkin writes, "No government is legitimate that does not show equal concern for the fate of all those citizens over whom it claims dominion and from whom it claims allegiance."¹⁰ On this view the legitimate government need not extend equal concern past national borders. The simple view I espouse rejects this moral judgment.

The sufficiency doctrine, the proposal that distributive justice requires that everyone has enough, can be interpreted either as a cosmopolitan or as a community-centered doctrine. That is to say, the doctrine might assert (1) that distributive justice requires that within each community its members are required to bring it about that all community members have enough, or (2) that distributive justice requires that everyone everywhere has enough. Sufficiency on the latter construal might seem far too expansive in its view of what we owe each other. But even on the expansive construal, at least obligation gives out once everyone reaches the sufficiency threshold. In contrast, the priority view appears much too demanding and open-ended in the obligations it imposes on us to improve people's lives around the globe. Compared to priority, the sufficiency doctrine appears to be more moderate, so it invites a careful examination.

II. CONSUMPTION ABOVE THE LINE OF SUFFICIENCY

For now, just assume that we can specify the level of a good enough or decent quality of life in a satisfactory way. (Later I shall challenge this assumption.) The question then arises, why is what happens to people above the line morally unimportant, at least so far as distributive justice is concerned?

Walzer's examples of consumption above the line of a good enough existence are rhetorically persuasive. The examples he mentions are cases in which it is far from clear that the person with more money uses it to effect a significant improvement in his life. Such cases are common; all of us use money in this way sometimes. We use available resources to satisfy our strongest desires that these resources allow us to satisfy. Often these urgent desires are tenuously, if at all, linked to anything we would be prepared to call our good. With a little cash, we get doughnuts; with more cash, more and fancier doughnuts.

But it is not a necessary and inevitable feature of satisfaction of desires above what Walzer identifies as the sufficient level that it fails to advance our good. If he had written that it does not matter from the standpoint of distributive justice, once everyone has a decent existence, that extra cash enables one person but not another to live for an extra twenty healthy, active years, to complete a life's ambition by writing a fine novel, to attain a thorough understanding of contemporary physics, or to get through a bad patch in a relationship with a partner one deeply loves without ruining the partnership, we would balk. These things and myriad others above what anyone would mark as the minimal level of a decent existence do matter. Such goods matter to those who attain them as well as to those who strive and fail to get them, and distributive justice should be responsive to these nontrivia.

So despite Walzer's rhetoric we should note that what happens above the line of sufficiency might be morally significant.¹¹ To my mind, the features of people's

circumstances that are germane to distributive justice are those that have an impact on their well-being. The ultimate concern of distributive justice, and hence the measure of someone's condition for purposes of applying distributive justice norms, should be the objective welfare or well-being or utility that the person attains (or perhaps: is enabled to attain) over the course of her life. Actions, practices, and institutions are to be assessed by the objective quality of life they deliver (or make possible) for those they affect. As a matter of practical policy we will need to be guided by standards of assessment that employ observable and administratable proxies for the objective welfare measures that it would be unfeasible directly to apply. We should care about the distribution of money for its overall impact on the quality of people's lives.

III. DOES ONE'S COMPARATIVE POSITION MATTER?

Inequality might be deemed good or bad for its effects. But leaving aside such instrumental value and disvalue, we may wonder if how one person's condition compares to another's might itself be intrinsically morally desirable or undesirable. For example, one might hold that it is intrinsically morally better, all other things being equal, if all persons are equally well off. For another example, one might hold that it is intrinsically morally better if saints are better off than sinners.

These are difficult, unsettled issues, in my view. But there is something intuitively plausible on its face about the sufficientarian's denial that how one person's condition compares to that of another is intrinsically morally important. To illustrate the thought, suppose it is discovered that there are more people who have ever lived than we previously thought. Suppose we had painstakingly calculated the overall moral significance of each person's life having gone as well or badly as it in fact went. But then we discover that a million years ago a million people lived on Jupiter. If how one person's condition compares to the condition of others is intrinsically morally important, we have to redo the calculations. It may now turn out that it was all things morally

considered morally bad that my life went as well as it did, given how my life compares to the lives of the ancient Jupiterians. The moral judgment about the moral significance of my existence that we made in ignorance of Jupiterian history may be reversed, once that history is accessible to us. This may be so, but is hard to swallow.

IV. ENTER SUFFICIENTARIANISM.

The preceding reflections might seem to set the stage for an easy victory for the sufficientarian doctrine. If how well I am doing as compared to how well others are doing does not intrinsically matter, it might seem natural to suggest that what does matter morally is that each person should have enough (where "enough" is not a fixed minimum percentage of the aggregate that people, or people in one's community, get).

Harry Frankfurt points out that philosophers arguing for the moral importance of equality express themselves in ways that strongly suggest that concern about inequality is not what really elicits the concern they voice.¹² Call this the "argument from egalitarian confusion." Egalitarians urge that significant inequality is bad by pointing to situations in which there is a large gap between the condition of well to do people and poor people and the poor face grim prospects, lead lives that are horrible or lacking in significant sources of satisfaction. Frankfurt correctly notes that examples of this sort do not really force the judgment that inequality per se is bad. In responding to the examples as described we should note the possibility that we are appalled above all by the grim badness of the lives that these poor people lead. But this grimness does not necessarily attach to the fate in which one gets the short end of the stick (is worse off than others). There are sticks and sticks, and some are much longer than others, so the short end may be not bad. If it were simply the gap in economic circumstances or well-being between poor and well-off people that troubled us, then we should be equally troubled by a similar gap between the conditions of the rich and the super-rich. But we are not; nor should we be. The suggested conclusion is that what is morally

objectionable is not that some people's condition is less good than the condition of others but rather that some people face grim life conditions that fall below any reasonable threshold of a decent quality of life.

With respect to inequalities in the wealth and income that different persons have, the idea would be that it is not morally problematic that some have more and others less. What is morally problematic is that some people have less income and wealth than they need to meet the standard of sufficiency.

What counts as enough money for a given individual depends on that individual's total set of circumstances along with her aims, ambitions, and preferences. Determining the extent of one's need for money requires a careful assessment of one's comprehensive present and likely future circumstances and wants. Merely to compare how much wealth and income one has compared to what others have is a distraction. To become preoccupied with such economic comparisons is to become alienated from an orientation to what really matters for the success of one's life.

Frankfurt explores the idea of economic sufficiency. Under what circumstances does an individual have enough income and wealth? Frankfurt's suggestion is that one has enough money when one is reasonably content with what one has, and one can be content in this way either because one's life is already going well enough or more money would not help remedy its shortcomings. Frankfurt adds that he understands being content in this context as compatible with recognizing that more money would improve one's life. Being content with the amount of money one has here means that one does not have "an *active interest* in getting more." Further improvement in one's economic condition is not important to the person. In other words, being contented with one's economic circumstances means "that he does not resent his circumstances, that he is not anxious or determined to improve them, and that he does not go out of his way or take any significant initiatives to make them better."¹³ To this account we should add the

qualifier that what counts is that the person would be reasonable to have the attitude toward his economic circumstances just described. We do not want the requirements of distributive justice as provision of sufficiency to vary depending on people's whims or overweening ambitions, so that if one desperately wants the moon and the stars, one does not have "enough" without them.¹⁴

Tying the notion of the good enough level of income and wealth to the attitudes it would be reasonable for a person to adopt toward her circumstances brings it about that the notion of the good enough level entirely floats away from the idea of sufficiency invoked by the argument from egalitarian confusion. That argument implicitly identifies the sufficient level for a person with the level of a minimally but acceptably decent quality of life. But one might have far above that level by anyone's lights yet still reasonably be desperately anxious to improve one's circumstances and be taking aggressive steps to secure improvements. By itself, this difficulty might not be daunting. Perhaps the best articulation of the sufficiency ideal requires abandonment of the argument from egalitarian confusion. But setting that argument to the side, we still find that the Frankfurt strategy taken on its own terms is implausible.

Notice first that a person who correctly anticipates that her life conditions will be impoverished and grim might reasonably work to adopt a Stoic attitude of indifference to the prospect that she will fail to enjoy many important components of a good life and that she will fail to command those normally important means to the good life, adequate income and wealth. She trains herself not to care about such matters. Suppose she is successful. Then the person will be content with the paltry income and wealth she has and will find nothing unsatisfying or distressing about how her life is going, even though in objective terms, the life is gruesome. We are supposing that the development of these attitudes is part of the person's best strategy of response toward her life conditions and that the attitudes she develops are in that sense reasonable.

There is another problem with the suggestion under review. A person at the high end, facing terrific life prospects, which include immensely favorable economic circumstances, might reasonably develop very ambitious life goals, which require for their fulfillment piles and piles of money in addition the immense stock of money he now enjoys. Let's call this person "Bill Gates." He might be the richest man in the world. Contemplating his economic circumstances, Bill is immensely actively interested in gaining immensely more money, and reasonably so. He needs that extra cash in order to fulfill his very ambitious life goals. Recall that these goals, while ambitious, are not unreasonably so. Indeed, developing an immense focussed strong concern for bettering his economic circumstances and regarding that concern as important to his life may be the most effective means available to him to give him the best chance of achieving his rational life plan. Frankfurt's construal of what it is for a person to have enough money then yields the conclusion for this sort of case, that the richest man in the world might not have enough.

The problem is that the subjective attitude toward getting more money for herself that it is reasonable for a person to develop in view of her total circumstances does not help to identify a notion of having enough that would be a useful tool for a theory of distributive justice. We evidently need to take another tack.

Perhaps this dismissal of Frankfurt's proposal (that to have enough is to have an amount that a reasonable person would be content to have) is too brisk. Suppose we say of the person who adapts to horrible life prospects by cultivating an attitude of contentment, that to identify the good enough level we ignore strategic adaptations of that sort. And suppose we say of the person whose excellent prospects spur her to greater ambition that while it is not unreasonable for her to develop ambitions that preclude contentment, in her circumstances contentment would also be reasonable. The good enough level would then be the lowest level of good that it would not be

unreasonable to be content with. One has enough when it is the case either that more resources would not help or one's life is going sufficiently well that it would not be unreasonable to be content with its course, with the stipulation that the reasonableness of being content that is in question is fixed only by one's response to the qualities of one's life and not by the consideration that developing or refraining from becoming content might improve it.

This objection fails to rescue the Frankfurt proposal. The attempt to characterize the measure of a good enough quality of life has led us in a circle. When does one have enough? When one, contemplating one's life, would reasonably be content. When would one reasonably be content? When one's life is going well enough. In order to apply the contentment test one must already be in possession of a way of determining when a life is good enough, but that measure was just what we were seeking in the first place.

There is yet another difficulty that afflicts the Frankfurt proposal. Frankfurt supposes it can be reasonable to be content with one's life, where this includes not being disposed to take steps to make it better even though one sees it can be improved. This supposition is aligned with Michael Slote's claim that rationality can consist in satisficing, not optimizing.¹⁵ One satisfices by taking steps that will produce a satisfactory outcome, where a satisfactory outcome need not be the best outcome that is reachable. Facing a sequence of offers to purchase a car one wants to sell, one might adopt the strategy of deciding on a satisfactory sale price and accepting the first offer that meets the chosen target.

Slote associates the idea of satisficing with the different idea of moderation. Satisficing is a strategy of choice; moderation as Slote explains it seems to be a matter of having modest appetites.¹⁶ Slote's moderate individual seeks and accepts what is less than the best for herself that she could get. Having had one snack, she rejects a

second, even though taking it would render her better off, because she is content with less than the best attainable. Setting aside choices that put the agent's own interests in conflict with the interests of other agents, Slote supposes that it is rational to be moderate and rational to be a satisficer not an optimizer.

Since taking steps to improve one's condition typically involves costs to the agent, including the cost of calculating the costs and benefits of further actions one might take, and since many choices one might take to improve one's condition are risky or uncertain, and carry a (possibly unknown) chance that the outcome will render one's condition worse, satisficing can in fact be an optimizing strategy for agents with finite information-gathering and choice-making capacity who face choices whose outcomes are risky or uncertain. Seeking a choice with a satisfactory expected outcome and not holding out for a better than satisfactory outcome are optimizing when the expected costs of seeking a better than satisfactory outcome outweigh the expected benefits. So to focus the issue whether it can be rational for an agent to satisfice, and seek a satisfactory outcome, rather than optimize, and seek the best outcome reachable, we should focus on decision problems in which the imperatives of satisfice and optimize clearly yield different directives. Suppose an agent is choosing among life plans, and there is nothing that relevantly distinguishes plan A and plan B except that plan A will yield a superior outcome. We suppose the agent knows this fact about A and B. If both A and B yield outcomes for certain that are above the satisfactory level, the Slote position is that a fully rational person might select B rather than A, on the ground that B, though inferior, is good enough. In the same vein Frankfurt would say that an agent whose life course is following B but who knows that she could costlessly switch to A and reach a better outcome for certain can be reasonable to be content with B and not switch course on the ground that B is good enough.

The issue posed here about the nature of rationality is delicate and controversial. I merely note that for anyone who shares my intuition that satisficing, where it is not rationalizable as optimizing under given constraints, is just plain irrational, has an extra reason to reject the Frankfurt proposal for determining the threshold of sufficiency. (In the same spirit, I find Slote's moderate individual, who rejects the snack even though taking it renders her better off at no cost to others, just plain irrational.)

Let us go back to the task of finding a criterion that will enable us to tell when a person's life is going well enough on the whole. We need a way of picking one level of quality of life as the good enough level.

V. SUFFICIENCY AND TRIAGE

The sufficientarian principle of justice says that institutions and practices should be arranged and actions chosen so that of those people who will ever live, as many as possible reach the sufficient level. This formulation leaves it open how to define the sufficient or good enough level.

In defining sufficiency, my bias is to employ an objective well-being standard. Such a standard measures how well off or badly off someone is, for purposes of determining whether he attains the good enough level, according to the objective well-being or welfare level that she reaches (or perhaps: is enabled to reach). If instead we opt for a standard of subjective well-being or of something that has nothing to do with well-being, it is unclear why we should care about whether the person is doing well or badly according to the alternative measure. If the measure can tell me that I am doing well when my life is going badly or doing badly when my life is going well, why should we care that people do well in that refined sense? But if the measure is deemed to be the well-being the person gets or is enabled to get, it becomes mysterious why there is supposed to be one special level of well-being that is all-important. Why is it acceptable

for justice to exhibit the tunnel vision that pays no mind to anything except the numbers of people that reach a particular welfare level?

We might approach this topic by reflecting on a type of situation in which something like a sufficiency approach does seem morally appropriate. If soldiers and civilians are wounded in battle, and medical care personnel and equipment cannot treat adequately all who need care, a triage morality has intuitive appeal.¹⁷ Suppose we identify being well off or badly off in this context with the severity of one's medical condition. A leximin approach, which bids us as a first priority to do all that we can to improve the condition of the very worst off, strikes us as uncalled for. There may be precious little we can do to aid the very worst off, and it may well be that caring for them as leximin decrees would involve lavishing huge amounts of scarce medical resources on people who will gain very little from these huge infusions of care. Allotting each wounded person an equal share of scarce medical resources (tailored to each patient's specific needs) also strikes us as implausible. Some of the wounded may be hardly wounded at all, some will die soon no matter what we do for them, some will live but only if we quickly give them a larger than per capita share of available resources.

Consider this norm: Distribute scarce medical resources so as to save as many lives as possible. This norm states a sufficientarian approach, with the level of sufficiency identified as avoiding near-term death. "Saving lives" is a vague goal. We might wonder if one who can be kept alive for a few days if treated, but cannot be healed, should count as reaching the threshold level if he is enabled to live for a few days. I leave aside here the task of suitably refining the statement of the sufficientarian goal.

Saving as many lives as possible will dictate giving no treatment to those who cannot be saved no matter what. It also dictates giving no treatment to someone who could be saved but only by expenditure of resources that would save more lives if

deployed to other potential patients. It also dictates giving no aid (at least during the post-battle emergency) to those who will live even if untreated. If this policy dictated leaving me untreated to die of my wounds, it seems a reasonable reply to a complaint I might voice that "we are leaving you untreated in order to save as many lives as possible."

I do not claim to have shown that sufficientarianism as described, applied to the battlefield scenario, is the morally preferred policy. I merely want to sketch a context in which sufficientarianism has some prima facie plausibility and does not seem obviously counterintuitive. In my view, the underlying reason that the battle field triage scenario fills this bill is that saving a life is arguably far more important morally than alleviating suffering for a few days or helping to make the death of those who are dying more comfortable. The difference between dying in the aftermath of battle and being enabled to emerge alive from one's wounds for the foreseeable future also seems far more significant than the difference between living but losing a limb and living and retaining the threatened injured limb. At the limit, if we regarded all possible outcomes for potential patients of receiving greater or lesser medical treatment as insignificant except the outcome in which a person whose life is threatened is saved from death, we would unequivocally embrace the sufficientarian principle in this application as we have interpreted it.

If we think that, for example, alleviating the pain experienced by people in their dying hours is utterly insignificant compared to the saving of a life, then we should not channel medical resources to alleviate the deathbed hours even of an infinite number of potential patients if this outcome must be purchased at the cost of leaving one person to die who could be saved. If we think that anything we might achieve by expenditure of medical resources pales into insignificance in just that way in comparison with the value

of saving a life, then the triage policy, use medical resources so as to maximize the number of lives saved, makes perfect sense.

I do not think that in any actual battlefield triage scenario, the possible utility gains would shape up as I have characterized a hypothetical case. What one should notice is that in the special imagined circumstances in which sufficientarianism would be a plausible and arguably correct policy, it yields the same recommendations as other views. Utilitarianism (along with variants of utilitarianism that give extra weight to securing utility gains and avoiding utility losses to those who are worse off but not the infinite weight that the maximin utility function accords) would chime in with the same verdict supporting the triage policy as described. Hence the battlefield example is not a good example to focus our thoughts as to whether sufficientarianism is a superior morality to these other views. In the example many views converge in their implications; to adjudicate among the views we need to examine examples in which the different principles would yield different implications concerning what we should do.

If we relax the very special factual assumptions that we packed into the characterization of the battlefield example, we find that sufficientarianism loses its aura of plausibility. We can do this by making the battlefield example more realistic. It is not in fact true that saving a life is of transcendent importance compared to any other goal that we might achieve with scarce medical resources and facing many patients in dire need. In some cases, the life that we could save would be so damaged as to be barely worth living or perhaps even not worth living at all. Suppose Smith is severely injured. We can keep him alive, but he will stay in a coma for ten years and then emerge to live a short life of a few hours of intense unremediable pain and then die. Suppose Jones is on the verge of death from wounds. We can save him, but he will never recover: he will be confined to a hospital and will never again have the use of reason. Saving a life encompasses many possible outcomes that vary greatly in their moral value. Some of

these possible outcomes even have negative moral value. On the other side, we might at very tiny cost of resources be able to alleviate the pain of many dying patients. Surely this is a great, not an inconsequential, possible gain. Another patient will live regardless of whether she is treated or not, but if treated she will have the full use of her limbs, and if untreated she will be a cripple. It is unnecessary to multiply examples. Even in battlefield triage situations we do not see the discontinuity in utilities to be gained from various possible expenditures of resources that could render the sufficientarian principle morally compelling.

VI. WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE SUFFICIENCY DOCTRINE

The idea that the first priority of justice is to bring all persons to the level of an acceptable quality of life so far as this is possible sounds attractive. The sufficiency norm seems to combine a kind of special concern for the worse off with a moderate limit on that concern. Once we have brought someone to the good enough level, what happens above that level is not the concern of justice. It might be that an acceptable quality of life requires ready access to a functioning car, but it does not matter from the standpoint of justice that I drive a Chevy and you drive a Ferrari. Moreover, the sufficiency doctrine weaves together individual responsibility with a moderately demanding conception of distributive justice. Once all are sustained above the line of sufficiency, and a fair framework of terms of interaction is established, each individual is responsible for how she chooses to live her life and for the well-being level that she gets as a result. The individual above the line of sufficiency is responsible for her life in the sense that she will bear the costs of the choices she makes and that meeting an unfortunate (but still above threshold) outcome will not trigger a justified claim for further compensation.

The rub comes in specifying the level of sufficiency in a nonarbitrary way. The relevant standard for determining when the sufficient level is reached cannot focus just

on one aspect of the quality of a person's life but must somehow integrate the value of various goods that we find significant in a human life. In broad terms, we need a way of making interpersonal comparisons of utility or welfare. This is a tall order, but for present purposes let's suppose we have the theoretically best interpersonal welfare standard on hand. It is not cheating to make this assumption in the present context of argument, for I am trying to refute the sufficiency doctrine, and to clarify where this specific doctrine goes wrong, it is best to grant controversial assumptions that the doctrine shares with a great many approaches to distributive justice. If interpersonal comparisons of welfare make no sense, then the theory of distributive justice is in trouble, not just the sufficiency doctrine.

But with such a standard in hand, we find a continuum with an infinite number of gradations of well-being. (We get qualitatively the same result if we have a very large finite number of degrees of well-being.) A person's life can range from horribly gruesome to wonderfully rich in fulfillment with indefinitely many stops between these extremes. Although moralists have proposed various putatively nonarbitrary ways of slicing into the continuum and declaring some particular point the good enough level (some suggestions will be reviewed below), my claim will be that there is no reason to set the level here rather than there or any other place.

Wherever the level of sufficiency is set, the doctrine of sufficiency must face two objections. The sufficientarian norm holds that we ought to bring it about that as many as possible of the people who will ever live reach the sufficient level defined over the course of their lives. The objections respond that the norm gives bad advice in two types of situations. If the line of sufficiency is set lower, the first problem is exacerbated; if the line is set higher, the second problem becomes worse.

The sufficientarian norm tells us what to do only if our action can affect the number of people who reach the good enough level. One type of problematic case

involves conflict of interest between those who can be moved to sufficiency or enabled to stay there and those who will remain above the line whatever we do but whose welfare is affected by our choice. Giving strict priority to increasing the numbers who meet sufficiency means that no matter how many people who are securely above the threshold could be enabled to secure further gains in well-being of no matter what size, however immense, such gains do not outweigh the moral priority of bringing it about that even a single person moves from just barely below the threshold to just barely at it. Suppose we can move millions and millions of people from moderate fulfillment to absolute bliss. These huge welfare gains count as nothing against the alternative option of moving a single person from just below the threshold to the threshold level. The question then arises, what makes the level selected as sufficient so morally special, such that the extreme discounting of other possible gains and losses as in this example makes sense?

A second type of problematic case involves conflict of interest between those just barely below the threshold level and those who are unavoidably leading subthreshold lives but who can be significantly aided nonetheless. Suppose millions of people are leading lives of hellish quality, perhaps at the level of concentration camp victims. They can be raised to at best a moderate quality of life, close to the threshold. But there is some constraint that prevents us from enabling any of these hell residents from advancing to the threshold level. Still, we can bring about huge improvements in quality of life for huge numbers of people. We have one alternative choice: we could instead boost one individual whose prospects are currently just below the threshold level to prospects that are a tiny bit better and place her at the threshold. Again, this moral urgency attributed to the goal of getting people to the sufficient level is counterintuitive.

The two problems have a common structure. Sufficientarianism accords lexical priority to the goal of getting as many people as possible to the good enough level. This

strict priority ranking makes sense only if everything that can befall an individual pales into utter insignificance from the standpoint of morality besides the single matter of whether she does or does not lead a life that overall reaches the threshold level. From an individual standpoint, of course people might care about many other things. To revert to Walzer's image, I might care a lot whether I buy my rugs from Sears Roebuck or from the Orient. But moral evaluation is supposed to impose, as it were, the priority of need over desire.

But as already mentioned, if you substitute other possible differences in people's condition for the ones Walzer mentions, the idea that all such comparisons are a "don't care" from a moral standpoint begins to look worse than dubious. Given that we can't be brought to sufficiency, it doesn't matter whether you die a painful lingering death at age ten whereas I die a quick painless death at age twenty. Given that we are both above sufficiency, it doesn't matter that I suffer from chronic arthritis and die at age sixty while you stay in the pink of health until you die at the ripe old age of 100. So the sufficientarian is forced to say. But only commitment to a bad theory would incline anybody to say such things, for they are as plainly false as any moral claims ever are.

To imagine a world in which sufficientarianism would be acceptable, we must conjure up one in which no gains in the quality of people's lives that might occur either above or below the line of sufficiency have any importance at all by comparison with the moral urgency of getting as many people as possible to the line of sufficiency. Either people themselves evaluating their own lives reasonably give strict lexical priority to attaining sufficiency, or people do not make such assessments but morality for reasons of its own overrides their assessments in the sufficientarian manner. Neither possibility is remotely credible.

VII. ATTEMPTS TO SPECIFY THE "GOOD ENOUGH" NONARBITRARILY

Walzer suggests plausibly that in a market society, possession of money confers membership. The “good enough” level is then set as the amount of economic resources that is necessary for full membership in society. So long as adequate access to cash and the other conditions needed to sustain the status of equal democratic citizen are met, economic inequality above the line of sufficiency is not a justice concern.

One might quibble with the claim that there is some minimum income and wealth necessary to be a full member of a democratic society. One can imagine personal talent and charm substituting for a secure income. Imagine a brilliant homeless mathematician who lives as a guest in the homes of one and then another of her mathematical colleagues, who offer hospitality in order to have the opportunity to collaborate on research projects with the guest. Not having the wherewithal to purchase anything at the supermarket does not make the itinerant mathematician a social outsider. But for most of us Walzer’s claim that access to money is a prerequisite for belonging to society is roughly correct. What is less plausible is to claim that there is some amount of economic resources (perhaps different for different persons) possession of which places one at a threshold of full membership. The membership in market society that money confers admits of many degrees. Once again the problem arises, how to select a point on a line in a nonarbitrary way.

Full membership in society, however exactly that is construed, and even if we could surmount the arbitrary line drawing difficulty, need not coincide with having very much by way of access to a good quality of life. The financial requirements for sustaining a nonillusory feeling of belonging to the community one inhabits may be very low in an impoverished society, but membership in that society does not provide access to the goods of civilization.

Nussbaum decomposes the idea of living well enough into a number of functionings or doings and beings the attainment of all of which is deemed necessary

and sufficient for a good enough quality of life. Nussbaum adds that justice requires that everybody should be sustained in the opportunity to attain all of these functionings at the good enough level. If one of the functionings is romantic fulfillment, one might have the capability to achieve this functioning but decide to live one's life as a celibate monk. If one of the necessary functionings is being adequately nourished, one who has the capability to be adequately nourished but voluntarily embarks on a sustained religious fast is not thereby the victim of injustice. On this account, the threshold of sufficiency is reached by an individual when over the course of her life she has the opportunity or capability to attain each of the functionings necessary for a good life at a good enough level.

The idea that the good life for a person can be understood as the achievement of a number of independently important dimensions or kinds of good makes sense. Nussbaum's efforts to specify the items that belong on this Objective List of human goods are admirable. By itself, however, this account leaves unsolved the problem of specifying a nonarbitrary sufficient level for each of the goods that is postulated. One might hope that when the problem is broken down into parts in this way the difficulty becomes tractable. Take the example of learning to ride a bicycle or learning to swim. There is a stage of floundering and wobbling and then a jump to a basic competence.

But even with regard to these examples, it is far from obvious that the level of basic competence is unambiguous (suppose I can dog-paddle a little but cannot master a range of strokes; suppose I can ride on a wide level path but cannot maintain control on a narrow downhill track) and doubtful that whatever level is specified to be good enough has special ethical significance. Moreover, with many significant functionings, such as becoming educated, enjoying good health and fitness, developing friendships, it is clearly futile to try to specify a sufficient level such that achievements below the threshold and above it have far less moral value. Finally, when we evaluate a person's

overall level of functioning, what matters is the appropriately weighted sum of all of her significant beings and doings. High achievements on one dimension can offset a low attainment on another, so that someone can be sustaining a very good quality of life even though one or another of her functioning (or capability, if you prefer) scores is subpar. Once again we are back to the idea of comprehensive welfare or well-being, which admits of indefinitely many gradations, none of which has any particular claim to be deemed the all-important threshold of sufficiency.

I have attempted to rebut the most plausible attempts in the literature to work out the notion of a “good enough” level of quality of life.¹⁸ I have no general proof that this notion cannot be specified in a satisfactory way to fulfill its role in a sufficientarian ethic. The doctrine of sufficiency as understood by its proponents puts enormous theoretical pressure on the notion of the “good enough.” My hunch is that this pressure cannot be contained in a satisfactory way. Put another way, the hunch is that the appeal of the sufficiency doctrine dissipates as the doctrine is worked out in detail.

VIII. SUFFICIENCY AND RESPONSIBILITY

Another objection against the sufficiency doctrine by itself only suggests the need to qualify not reject it. In this sense the criticism to be adumbrated is less fundamental than those developed to this point. Still, the necessary qualification is nontrivial.

As I have been construing it, the sufficiency doctrine requires that we bring as many people of those who shall live as possible to the level of sufficiency. Being at the sufficient level is to be judged over the course of a person's entire life. The aim that is proposed is that the person's life taken as a whole should meet the sufficiency level. There are questions raised by this formulation about how to interpret the sufficiency of a life. Suppose that an individual is far above the sufficiency level for most of her life but sinks below it for a time toward the end of her life. Do we judge that as a whole this individual did not attain sufficiency, because that requires that at each moment of her life

the good enough level is maintained? Or should we say that over her life as a whole this person did attain sufficiency, because this requires that on the average the times of the person's life should be at the good enough level, and this individual's life is above sufficiency on the average? Or do we need rather to make a single holistic judgment which takes account of various factors that affect the character of the life of the individual taken as a whole but that cannot be decomposed without residue to goods that accrue at particular discrete times of the person's life? I leave these complications aside, and just suppose we have some acceptable way of assessing whether or not a person's life as a whole reaches the good enough level.

The objection based on responsibility argues that some ways in which a person's life as a whole might fail to reach sufficiency are properly ascribable to the person, as her responsibility, not the moral responsibility of society. That is to say, the moral obligations set by a reasonable theory of social justice do not require society to guarantee or do all in its power to ensure any level of welfare for any individual. The most that society is required to do is make it possible for individuals to attain the "just" level of welfare by suitable effort on their part. Assume contrary to the arguments of the previous sections that we have a compelling account of the good enough level that justice requires us to secure for as many as can be secured. Suppose that a society dedicated to achieving sufficiency for all provides me with a level of resources and education that would enable to get me to get to the good enough level if I conducted my life in a reasonably prudent way. But I do not. I squander my opportunities and am on a path that will take me to the gutter. But since the sufficientarian principle of justice imposes as a first priority that as many as possible be sustained at the good enough level, society on this view is obligated to supply me with extra resources to make up for my imprudence, at least so long as doing so does not prove to be an inefficient use of resources from the sufficientarian standpoint. But then suppose I squander these

resources again, and again, and again. Perhaps there are good reasons to adopt a forgiving line on responsibility, so that we should provide people second chances and third chances and fourth chances to assemble their life into a decent shape even if they have thoroughly ruined their first, second, and third chances. But in principle the sufficientarian obligation never runs out. Society remains committed as a first priority of justice (that takes lexical priority over any other duty that might compete with it), that as many as possible be brought to have the good enough level. This goes too far. There should be a moral division of responsibility between society and the individual, that at some point permits society to say to the individual that enough has been done for him regardless of the lifetime welfare level he sustains.

There is a flip side to this responsibility objection. If the sufficiency doctrine holds that as many people as possible be sustained at the good enough threshold over the course of their lives, it follows that if we accept the doctrine, we should restrict individual liberty in self-regarding matters whenever doing so increases the numbers who are sustained at the threshold. Consider then dangerous activities that are dangerous only to their voluntary participants and that are highly valued by them. Suppose, as is likely, that those who engage in mountain climbing would not be reduced to a below threshold existence if they were prohibited from engaging in the sport. Yet some youthful participants will suffer premature death or unremediable severe disability from climbing injuries. These unlucky participants end up below the sufficiency threshold (for the purposes of considering this objection I am supposing that my previous arguments denying that a reasonable nonarbitrary sufficient level can be specified are unsuccessful). It follows that banning mountain climbing, if we can police the ban without excessive cost, will boost the number of people who are sustained at the good enough level. So we ought to proclaim and enforce such a ban, according to the sufficiency doctrine.

I am not opposed in principle to all paternalistic restriction of liberty¹⁹ but the sufficiency doctrine goes overboard in this regard. In the example just described, the practice of mountain climbing might generate large welfare gains for those involved in it, despite the unfortunate accidents that befall a few. The sufficiency doctrine would recommend banning the activity when virtually any remotely plausible alternative ethic would reject this counsel. This is another instance of the implausibility of ignoring for all practical purposes as morally insignificant all welfare gains that can be achieved, no matter how large, no matter the numbers of people affected, when the gains lie above the line of sufficiency.

IX. A WIDER SUFFICIENCY DOCTRINE?

The discussion to this point is directed at a particular interpretation of the idea that justice requires that everyone have enough. The interpretation holds that justice accords strict lexical priority to the aim of bringing it about that as many as possible of the people who shall live reach the level of sufficiency. Perhaps the trouble lies not in the general idea of sufficiency but in the uncharitable gloss I have given it.

One possibility is to relax the stipulation that the aim of attaining sufficiency for as many as possible takes lexical priority over other justice values. One aim has lexical priority over another just in case one should refuse to sacrifice even the smallest degree of fulfillment of the first aim in order to secure any degree whatsoever of fulfillment of the second aim. Suppose we assert that attaining sufficiency is important, but does not merit strict lexical priority.

The core of my objection against sufficiency is that it demands discontinuity, a jump in our moral response, in an area where no basis for this discontinuity can be found. The assertion that the aim of sufficiency ought to get less than lexical priority should attract the objections I have already made, but to a lesser degree, depending on

the strength of then priority for sufficiency asserted. At the limit, just asserting that attaining sufficiency would be nice is not a strong enough claim to be objectionable.

Another possibility avoids the objection that sufficientarianism favors a very slight improvement in one person's position that barely pushes this individual to sufficiency over any gains however large that could be obtained for people whose lives are hellishly bad, significantly improveable at modest resource cost, but unavoidably subthreshold. This revised sufficiency doctrine says that the top priority of distributive justice is to bring about improvements in the lives of those who are below the threshold of sufficiency. Below the threshold, priority goes to obtaining benefits for those who are worse off, whether or not they can be brought to sufficiency. This priority might be interpreted as more or less strict. The character of revised sufficiency can be indicated by considering the version of it in which priority is maximally strict. One then should always give strict lexical priority to bringing about gains or preventing losses for the worst off, up to the threshold of sufficiency. Revised sufficiency in this version may be described as "maximin with a cap."²⁰

Revised sufficiency consists of two elements. One is that we should give priority to bringing about gains (and preventing losses) for the worse off. The second element is that priority for the worse off is shaped by the threshold of sufficiency: Bringing about gains for those below the threshold has absolute priority over bringing about gains for those already above the threshold, and for those above the threshold, priority for the worse off ceases to obtain.

Of these two elements, only the second strikes me as objectionable. Priority for the worse off is fine. The extreme maximin version of this priority is too strict, however. To hold as maximin insists that achieving a benefit of any size, however small, for a single worst off person takes precedence over achieving a benefit, no matter how large,

for any number of next-worst-of persons, is surely excessive. But determining the appropriate strength of priority is beyond the scope of this essay.

Shaping priority by the threshold of sufficiency, however, is implausible. As I have urged, it is unacceptable to give no weight at all to benefits of any size for any number of individuals above the level deemed sufficient when those benefits can be purchased by losses no matter how small for no matter how few individuals below the threshold. For example, preventing lethal diseases that strike only above-threshold individuals could be morally more cost-effective than achieving tiny pleasures for below-threshold individuals. Also, priority to the extent that it matters at all, does not cease altogether to matter when one has to resolve conflicts of interest among individuals who are above the threshold to different degrees.

Some of the people below the threshold of sufficiency that the revised view gives priority to aiding will be very poor transformers of resources into welfare. They can be helped, but an enormous infusion of aid resources provides them very little benefit. Such people become basins of attraction of resources under the revised view. This defect attaches to the sufficiency doctrine, but when we move to the revised sufficiency view, the problem worsens. This is so because the revised view recommends channeling resources to poor transformers even when they cannot be brought to sufficiency, so long as further infusions of resources will produce some further gain in their condition.

X. PRIORITARIAN JUSTICE

I hope the critical discussion of sufficientarianism paves the way for a sympathetic appreciation of a rival doctrine that to my mind absorbs the strengths of sufficientarianism without the weaknesses.

Recall Frankfurt's disparagement of the advocates of equality. Philosophers such as Ronald Dworkin and Thomas Nagel are presented as invoking the contrast

between the impoverished lives of poor people and the enormous material privileges enjoyed by many citizens of the world's most prosperous nations. It is bad that some are so badly off while others are prospering to so great an extent, at least if we suppose the situation is remediable. The prosperous could shift resources to the needy, or failing that, the morally minded state could compel the prosperous to disgorge some of their advantages to aid the truly needy. The contrast between grim suffering and extreme opulence is supposed to persuade us that inequality per se is morally undesirable. But if equality per se were what is undesirable in the described scenario, we would equally be appalled by the similar degree of inequality between the very prosperous and the super prosperous. But in fact this latter inequality strikes us as a "don't care." Hence what is undesirable in the first scenario is not inequality per se.

What is most plausible in the disparagement is the claim that everyone's having the same is not intrinsically morally desirable. A broader claim is also plausible: how well one person's life goes is fixed by the weighted sum of objective goods one attains, not by how the sum of one's goods compares to the sums of others.

But it is a long jump from these claims to the doctrine of sufficiency. In particular, the agreement with the observation that the gap between the life prospects of the hopelessly destitute and the moderately well off matters a lot more than the same-sized gap between the life prospects of the very well off and the incredibly well off does not compel agreement with the claim that nothing matters other than avoiding grim conditions of life and attaining sufficiency. We can account for the observation without countenancing the dubious notion of the "good enough" quality of life.

Consider the weighted utilitarian or prioritarian moral principle, which holds that the moral value of securing a benefit of a given size for a person or avoiding a loss of that size for a person is greater, the greater the benefit as measured by a utility or welfare scale, and greater, the lower the level of utility or welfare that the person would

have reached over the course of her life in the absence of that benefit or loss prevention. This formulation assumes that cardinal interpersonal comparisons of utility or welfare make sense, though in given circumstances they might be difficult or unfeasible. This “principle” includes a family of positions that vary depending on the relative weight that is assigned to size of benefit and prior welfare level of its recipient in calculating the moral value of benefits. Prioritarianism, as a form of act-consequentialism, holds that we ought always to maximize moral value so defined.

For the prioritarian, what matters morally when getting a benefit to a person is in the offing is not how badly off that person is by comparison to others. What matters is the degree to which the person is well off or badly off as measured on an absolute or noncomparative scale.

To see this point, consider two possible situations in which we might confer a small benefit on Smith. In each case the world contains 100 persons and Smith is worse off than any of them. The two possible worlds differ in this way: in one, Smith is very badly off, say at -100 , a hellish condition. The other 99 persons all have lives worth living, above the zero point. In the second world, by contrast, while Smith is worst off, the differences in well-being between Smith and the others are minuscule. Smith is at -50.0002 , for example, and the other 99 are at -50.0001 . In this second case it hardly matters at all whether to enable Smith or one of the others to obtain the benefit, whereas in the first case, it is morally a big deal that the benefit should if possible be channeled to Smith rather than to any of the others. What is morally significant in determining what we should do is the absolute well-being level of the persons we might aid or harm, not their relative positions.

Return to Frankfurt’s argument from egalitarian confusion. First of all we should agree with Frankfurt that the amounts of wealth and income one has are not in and of themselves ethically important. What matters is the quality of life that one’s wealth and

income together with one's other circumstances enable one to attain. According to prioritarianism, it is morally more valuable to get a single unit of well-being improvement for a very badly off person than for a moderately badly off person, and it is less important to secure a comparable small benefit to a moderately well off person than to a decidedly well off person, and still less important to channel a similar benefit to an extremely well off person than to someone who is far above that level in well-being, even though in each case the inequality in well-being between the potential recipients is exactly the same. The prioritarian weighting secures this result. To account for what is plausible in the argument from egalitarian confusion we have no need to posit the idea of a sufficient or good enough level along with the norm that the top priority of justice is to maximize the number of people who get to this good enough level. We have seen that these latter ideas turn out to be problematic when examined, so it is a welcome result that the argument does not pressure us in the slightest to embrace them.

Eschewing leximin priority rankings, the prioritarian will in practice espouse a moderate egalitarianism. By this I mean that the priority accorded to securing gains for the worse off is not absolute, but varies depending on the amount of benefit that can be secured for better off and worse off. Leximin says that we should prefer a penny's worth of benefits to the worst off at the cost of any amount no matter how great of foregone gains for no matter how many better off persons. Prioritarianism rejects this rigid and doctrinaire priority ranking.

In other respects prioritarianism is a radical morality. The choice between coercive and noncoercive means to prioritarian ends is to be made strictly according to the calculation that fixes which policy would deliver better consequences as assessed by prioritarianism in the long run. At the level of first principle there is no special moral presumption against coercion and compulsion.

Like any impartial consequentialism, prioritarianism bids us to pay no heed in principle to distance in space and time or to national boundaries or special ties such as family or friendship or community. One's obligations are the same towards distant strangers and persons who will exist in the future as to fellow members of a particular current society near at hand. It may be that it is infeasible or impossible for me to do anything that would make a difference to the lives of distant persons and possible and feasible to do a lot for those close by. If so, the prioritarian principle limits its focus to the near at hand—but only to the degree that this extreme assumption actually holds true. It may be that it is much more difficult for me to become sufficiently informed about distant people and places than about my own neighborhood so that I can form reliable views as to how to help the strangers and avoid harming them, and again, if this is really so, then judgments about how I should act toward them are to be discounted by their uncertainty. But in principle the prioritarian moral imperative to help the needy varies in strength only with people's neediness and the costs and benefits of alternative actions, not with the strength of the special ties one has to particular persons.

A subtler issue arises once one notes that the prioritarian ought is a thin notion. From the fact that I ought to do X it does not follow and may not be true that if I fail to do X I should be punished even merely by internal pangs of conscience. Bringing it about that punishment accrues to those who act wrongly might itself be a wrong act by prioritarian standards. The social planner implementing prioritarianism would not wish to make war against human nature by raising the practical standard of obligation so high that people are socialized to inflict punishment on violations of duties by self and others that natural selfishness strongly inclines people to perpetrate all the time. At least, the ideal social planner would not make war against human nature in this way if, as is likely, doing so makes the expectable outcome worse by the prioritarian moral standard. So from the fact that well off people morally ought to give away much of their wealth toward

the amelioration of global poverty and act morally wrongly if they do not it does not immediately follow that people should be made to feel obligated to act in this way where being obligated involves being liable to punishment for noncompliance.

XI. RESPONSIBILITY-CATERING PRIORITARIANISM

One further wrinkle demands straightening.

Even if the priority view only incorporated priority to the worse off, it would still give rise to an instrumental norm of individual responsibility. By holding people responsible for their choices and conduct in the sense that people will be made to bear some of the costs that their conduct causes that fall on other people and on themselves, we bring it about that over the long run more moral value is achieved than if we refrained from enforcing some such norm of responsibility.

But quite aside from the instrumental value of holding people responsible, I suppose that bringing it about that a benefit of a given size goes to someone who is badly off through no fault or choice of her own is intrinsically morally better than bringing it about that a same-sized benefit accrues to someone who is equally badly off but has brought about her own unfortunate condition by her own fault or choice. By the same token, if someone is well off by sheer luck, and another is well off by dint of morally commendable effort on behalf of worthy goals, it is intrinsically morally better to secure a gain or avoid a loss for the second person than the first if we must choose between them.

Even if one agrees with these last claims, the question arises how much moral value responsibility contributes to outcomes apart from its instrumental uses. Also, one might wonder whether the intrinsic importance of responsibility, whatever it should turn out to be, has much by way of implications for practical policy, given the futility of trying to devise governmental policies that would vary treatment of individuals with their lifetime responsibility levels. I have optimistic hunches that we can gauge the importance of

responsibility and that it will not turn out to be irrelevant to practical policy guidance, but I do not claim to have done anything in this essay to substantiate these hunches.

XII. YACHTS, "HI-FI," AND RUGS FROM THE ORIENT

Against Walzer's moderate and sane-sounding view, I have claimed that it might well matter from the standpoint of distributive justice that the quality of one person's recreational boats, music playing equipment, and rugs is superior to another's. Some individuals have more and better than others. Such an inequality might be morally significant, and this might be so even if it is conceded that all people have "enough" according to the sufficiency doctrine.

Eliminating some inequality might improve the well-being of the worse off, even at some cost to the better off, so that weighted well-being rises. If so, and if the policy that promotes equality does not dampen incentives so as to lessen weighted-well-being in the long run, then other things being equal, prioritarian justice favors the elimination of the inequality.²¹

The correct account of how one person comes to have more and better than another might indicate that sheer unchosen luck rather than the moral quality of people's choices creates the discrepancy. If this happens to be so, then considerations of responsibility do not block the presumption in favor of egalitarian transfer that is established if it is the case that the transfer would boost weighted well-being over the long run.

Being worse off than another does not matter morally in and of itself, but being well off or badly off matters, and if the urgency of a person's moral claim to our aid is stronger, the worse off the person is, then it will turn out that being worse off than another will put one ahead in the justice queue. One's comparative position is the shadow of what really matters.

¹ . Michael Walzer, Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality (New York: Basic Books, 1983, 107-108.

² . I do not here trace these claims back to Walzer's master principle of justice, that the practices of a society are just when they conform to the shared values of their participants. I am interested in a truncated, bowdlerized version of Walzer's views that strikes me as more interesting and compelling than the master principle.

³ . Harry G. Frankfurt, "Equality as a Moral Ideal," in Frankfurt, The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 134-158. I should note that while Frankfurt argues against economic egalitarianism and urges that what matters is not that people have the same income and wealth, but that in these respects they have enough, he does not address the issue, what justice requires, all things considered. In a footnote on page 150 he states, "The fact that some people have more than enough money suggests a way in which it might be arranged for those who have less than enough to get more, but it is not in itself a good reason for redistribution." Whether there are any good reasons for redistribution, and if so, what they might be, are topics into which Frankfurt does not delve, beyond the statement just quoted.

⁴ . Elizabeth Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?," Ethics 109, no. 2 (January, 1999): 287-337. For discussion, see Richard Arneson, "Luck Egalitarianism and Prioritarianism," Ethics 110, no. 2 (January, 2000), 339-349.

⁵ . Martha Nussbaum, "Aristotelian Social Democracy," in Liberalism and the Good, ed. R. Bruce Douglas, Gerald M. Mara, and Henry S. Richardson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 203-252; Nussbaum, "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of

Aristotelian Essentialism,” Political Theory 20 (1992), 202-246; Nussbaum, “Women and Cultural Universals, in Nussbaum, Sex and Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 29-54. For discussion, see Richard Arneson, “Perfectionism and Politics.” Ethics 111, no. 1 (October, 2000), 37-63; also Martha C. Nussbaum, “Aristotle, Politics, and Human Capabilities: A Response to Antony, Arneson, Charlesworth, and Mulgan,” Ethics 111, no. 1 (October, 2000), 102-140.

⁶ . For the idea that social justice requires a set of institutions that brings it about that the worst off members of society are as well off as possible, see John Rawls, A Theory of Justice, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁷ . See Charles Murray, Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980 (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

⁸ . For simplicity I ignore the case of transferring resources to one in the expectation that the resources will be redistributed, as when we get resources into Mother Theresa’s hands with the aim of aiding the poor of Calcutta.

⁹ . J. S. Mill, Principles of Political Economy, Book V, chapter xi, section 13, in Collected Works, vol. 3, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 960.

¹⁰ . Ronald Dworkin, Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 1. For an interesting argument that supports Dworkin’s position that the requirements of distributive justice to help those afflicted by unchosen disadvantage are stronger among fellow citizens than among strangers, see Richard W. Miller, “Cosmopolitan Respect and Patriotic Concern,” Philosophy and Public Affairs 27, no. 3 (Summer, 1998): 202-224.

¹¹ . Readers might be puzzled at this point, because the text proceeds on the assumption that if something matters morally, it matters from the standpoint of distributive justice. But cannot a consideration matter morally from some nonjustice standpoint such as human compassion or human decency? In my perhaps idiosyncratic usage, "justice" considerations encompass all of the serious moral obligations that people owe to each other. Distributive justice encompasses all significant moral requirements having to do with the distribution of goods and evils except for second-order requirements that are triggered by wrongdoing.

¹² . Frankfurt, "Equality as a Mortal Ideal," 146-148. Frankfurt cites two instances of affirmations of the disvalue of inequality that exhibit the confusion he notices: Ronald Dworkin, "Why Liberals Should Care about Equality," in Dworkin, A Matter of Principle (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 206; also Thomas Nagel, "Equality," in Nagel, Mortal Questions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). The criticism of Nagel is at Frankfurt, 151. Nagel revisits this issue in Equality and Partiality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 69-71.

¹³ . Frankfurt, "Equality as a Moral ideal," 154. The quotation in the preceding sentence is from 153.

¹⁴ . Frankfurt mentions the possibility of a reasonableness qualification as described in the text but remains noncommittal regarding it.

¹⁵ . Michael Slote, Beyond Optimizing: A Study of Rational Choice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

¹⁶ . Ibid, 10-13. I owe this point, and others, to written comments by David Schmitz on a preliminary draft of this essay.

¹⁷ . I borrow the understanding of sufficiency through battlefield triage from an unpublished essay by John Roemer, though I do not think he would endorse the lesson I draw from the comparison.

¹⁸ . For another interesting attempt to specify the sufficient level, see Arthur Ripstein, Equality, Responsibility, and the Law (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chapter 9. Ripstein urges that when distributive justice is done, a fair background is in place, which secures each individual the resources needed for meaningful agency. My response by now should be predictable. Meaningful agency (under any plausible construal) comes in degrees, and there is no unique level of agency that generates distributive justice imperatives. Also, a person who can exercise meaningful agency might still face unchosen life conditions that offer her grim prospects for a decent quality of life, prospects so bad that others have a justice obligation to ameliorate them.

¹⁹ . Paternalistic restriction of liberty is restriction of a person's liberty against her will for her own good. It also qualifies as paternalistic if one restricts the liberty of one person to prevent harm to another when the person being harmed or threatened with risk of harm voluntarily consents to be affected by the first party's action.

²⁰ . Thanks to David Schmitz for suggesting this version of revised sufficiency.

²¹ . Of course, in some circumstances prioritarian justice would deliver the result that resources should be transferred from worse off to better off. (Suppose that if Bill Gates had even more money than he currently has, he would do things with the extra cash that would bring about more weighted well-being in the long run than would come into existence if the cash transfer to Bill were not made.) My point in the text is that

according to priority, there is sometimes a straightforward and compelling case for transfers to reduce inequality.