

Sufficiency or Priority?

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The doctrine of sufficiency says, roughly, that what is important from the point of view of morality is that each person should have enough.¹ The doctrine has recently become a popular theme for philosophical analysis. The notion of 'having enough' and its ethical significance are by now central to any discussion of the ethics of distribution. The basic idea is that there is a privileged level of well-being, such that if X is badly off (below the threshold), and Y is well off (above it), at least some priority has to be assigned to benefiting X. This idea, which plays an important role in welfare programs in modern societies, is gaining increasing popularity among philosophers.

Roger Crisp has recently developed a very attractive version of sufficiency.² Elsewhere, I developed my own version, which is different from Crisp's with respect to some of the central issues.³ My purpose here is to point to the difficulties in the Crisp version, in order to show that a certain modification of the version I defended is the best way for sufficientarians to follow.

The paper is organized as follows. In section 1, I distinguish strong formulations of the doctrine from weak ones and show that Crisp's is particularly strong. In section 2, I present the crucial challenge Crisp's strong version faces. In section 3, I present Crisp's answer to this crucial challenge, and in section 4, I reject it. In section 5, I develop a different answer to the challenge, which suggests a radically different version of strong sufficientarianism, which is set forth in section 6.

1. Why Sufficiency? Crisp's Three Answers

I shall, in this section, distinguish three different answers to the question 'why sufficiency?' and present two versions of the doctrine that are supported by two of the answers. (Later on, I shall present a third version, motivated by what seems to me to be the best answer.) The first answer—the one given by what I shall call 'weak sufficientarianism'—is very simple: if people are very well off, the fact that one fares worse than the other is morally insignificant. Thus, there is a threshold above which differences do not at all matter. The second reason philosophers find for sufficiency is that it rejects equality as a moral ideal. This reason, I believe, has to be sharply distinguished from the first. As we shall see, Harry Frankfurt and Roger Crisp—two of the major proponents of the doctrine—seem to believe that their versions of the doctrine motivate such a rejection. Yet, their antiegalitarian *argument* can support merely a version that does not reject egalitarians' intuitions

but corrects their unhappy formulation. The third answer—the one that *is* reflected by the Crisp version—construes sufficiency as a relaxed version of maximin: the rational is to limit the moral significance of numbers; for, in some cases, the numbers should not count. Let me present these three reasons in more detail.

I shall start from the second reason, for, historically, the interest in the doctrine of sufficiency arose in the wake of new doubts with regard to egalitarianism. In light of writings by Harry Frankfurt, Larry Temkin, Derek Parfit, Dennis McKerlie, Elizabeth Anderson, and others, it became clear that comparative egalitarianism⁴ is a very complex ideal. Some believe that it is too complex, or even that its very coherence should be doubted.⁵ The first difficulty of egalitarianism, and the most important one, is that comparative egalitarianism recommends leveling down people, even if no one benefits from it. Indeed, most egalitarians believe that a state of affairs in which every one is badly off is *prima facie* preferable to a state of affairs in which some are equally badly off, and some are well off. This sounds unacceptable. True, egalitarians are quick to assure us that in their view, all things considered, the latter state is preferable to the former, but this does not really help. The objection regards the egalitarian *prima facie* judgment. In addition, egalitarians have difficulties in measuring inequality,⁶ identifying the group within which the ideal of equality is to be fulfilled,⁷ and the segment of time in which the ideal has to be fulfilled.⁸

Some philosophers conclude that equality should be abandoned. But these philosophers are divided into two main camps: those who *rephrase* egalitarian intuitions and those who explicitly *reject* them. Consider:

The weighted priority view: benefiting people matters more the worse off those people are, the more of those people there are, and the greater the benefits in question.⁹

According to the priority view, equality *per se* does not matter. This makes it invulnerable to the leveling down objection. Yet, it can easily be shown that this view has a built-in bias towards equality. Indeed, in this view, equality has no intrinsic value, but it has a necessary *derivative* value, so to speak.¹⁰ Whenever X is worse off than Y, benefits to X are *prima facie* morally preferable to benefits to Y. Hence, a declared commitment to equality is an *unsuccessful* attempt to formulate a morally *sound* prioritarian conviction.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, the priority view is widely recognized as nonrelational egalitarianism.

Others who reformulate the egalitarians' conviction rather than reject them are 'weak sufficientarians'. In its weak reading, the doctrine of sufficiency is a version of the weighted priority view, and as such it offers a slightly different correction of the egalitarians' conviction. The weak version of sufficiency picks a priority function that diminishes to zero earlier than the prioritarian's priority function. More specifically, it says that the weight of the prioritarian consideration decreases as a certain threshold—located somewhere *within* the well-being space—is approached. Just below the threshold, some small priority is to be given, which then diminishes to zero at the threshold. (Such a threshold is the

main commitment of any version of sufficiency; later I shall do more to introduce it properly.) In other words, while prioritarianism contends that priority diminishes to zero at the 'absolute perfection' or 'bliss' level, namely, where well-being cannot be exceeded, weak sufficientarianism argues that priority diminishes to zero before absolute perfection. The weak doctrine of sufficiency comes down to this:

Weak sufficientarianism: (i) Benefiting people below the threshold matters more the worse off those people are. (ii) Above the threshold no priority is to be assigned. (iii) As the threshold is approached, the prioritarian considerations continuously decrease to zero. (iv) In general (i.e. both above and below the threshold) benefiting people matters more the more of those people there are, and the greater the benefits in question.

Just like in the priority view, in weak sufficientarianism, equality per se does not matter. And (a weaker) built-in bias towards equality is recommended: if all others things are equal, benefiting X is more important than benefiting Y, if X is below a certain threshold and Y is better off than X. Equality at the low levels has *derivative* value.

Clearly, Harry Frankfurt and Roger Crisp should not be satisfied by this weak version of sufficiency. This is because they seem to believe that, rather than searching for a sound or corrected reformulation of egalitarian conviction, we should reject it. Thus, following John Stuart Mill, Crisp claims that commitment to egalitarianism is generated by the human inclination to envy and to sympathy. 'This genealogy is meant to throw doubt on the self-standing normative status of principles of justice, on the ground that they have emerged, through a nonrational process, from natural and nonrational desires'.¹² Real egalitarians now and in the past—who have been motivated by what would be called broadly egalitarian concerns—are concerned about improving the lives of the badly off, not about improving the lives of people who are not doing as well as some others. Frankfurt¹³ opposes egalitarianism for similar reasons. 'A concern for economic equality, construed as desirable in itself, tends to divert a person's attention away from endeavoring to discover ... what he himself really cares about. ... Exaggerating the moral importance of economic inequality is harmful ... because it is alienating'.¹⁴

These statements are indefensible unless prioritarianism and weak sufficientarianism are false. For, had prioritarianism been true, our egalitarian statements could be easily explained as a misformulation of our prioritarian valid intuitions. Envy has nothing to do with the priority view that attaches no moral significance to differences as such. The same is true of weak sufficientarianism. Of course, strict egalitarians like Temkin believe that (undeserved) inequality is unfair wherever found. Temkin believes, however, that inequality matters at low levels *more* than it matters at high ones.¹⁵ Weak sufficientarianism might be conceived as a reformulation of this intuition. Temkin's egalitarian conviction is—according to a plausible reading

of weak sufficientarianism—an *unsuccessful* formulation of a morally *sound* belief.

Alas, neither Crisp's nor Frankfurt's counterexample against the prioritarian built-in bias towards equality can motivate more than a weak version of sufficiency: 'We tend to be quite unmoved, after all, by inequalities between the well-to-do and the rich . . . The fact that some people have much less than others is morally undisturbing when it is clear that they have plenty',¹⁶ Frankfurt says. Crisp invites us to consider a distribution between two groups of residents in Beverly Hills, some of whom are rich (in terms of well-being), and some of whom are super-rich. 'Once recipients are at a certain level, any prioritarian concern for them disappears entirely'.¹⁷ These examples cannot justify the belief that egalitarian intuitions are repugnant (i.e. rooted in our envious nature—Mill, Crisp) or harmful and alienating (Frankfurt).

Crisp forwards another answer to our question, and this answer supports stronger versions of the doctrine of sufficiency. (This version, however, is not antiegalitarian in any interesting sense, as it has nothing against the built-in bias towards equality in the lower levels.) In order to present it, let me make some terminological remarks. Consider clause (iii) of weak sufficientarianism again. I shall call this thesis 'well-being continuity'. Versions of sufficientarianism that reject well-being continuity are 'strong'. They say that although above the threshold no priority is to be assigned (in accordance with clause [iii]), just below it, a very significant priority should be assigned. (Versions of sufficiency would be 'stronger' as far as they attach more priority to benefiting those who are just below the threshold.) Finally, clause (iv) will be defined as the *utilitarian* aspect of weak sufficientarianism.

Crisp criticizes the utilitarian aspect of the priority view which weak sufficientarianism shares with prioritarianism. There are cases, Crisp claims, in which the numbers should not count—and the priority view (as well as weak sufficientarianism) fails to say so. In these cases prioritarianism requires giving tiny benefits to those who are very well off at a huge cost to the worst off. To produce such a case, imagine a small group of badly off people and a huge group of well off people. Suppose, in addition, that we are able to remove a very serious pain from the badly off people, or give a nontrivial physical pleasure (a very good chocolate, say) to the huge group of the well off. Call this case 'Chocolate to the Well Off'.¹⁸ In both views—prioritarianism as well as weak sufficientarianism—we may prefer benefiting the well off. This happens when the moral value of the *aggregate* utility gained by the well off defeats the special importance of the benefits the badly off would gain. This ruling seems to Crisp to be counterintuitive.

Crisp is well aware of the fact that there is a famous principle that implies the right result in Chocolate to the Well Off, namely, the principle of maximin. According to maximin, absolute priority should be assigned to benefiting the worst off people. Crisp argues, convincingly, that maximin is unacceptable. He says, 'because the absolute priority view is an "innumerate" maximin principle, it will . . . allow the smallest benefit to the smallest number of worst off to trump any benefit . . . to any but the worst off, even the next worst off'.¹⁹ In order to

avoid such a result, Crisp produces a relaxed version of this principle—which shares its antiutilitarian aspect.

Absolute sufficientarianism: (i) Absolute priority is to be given to nontrivial benefits for those below the threshold. (ii) Below the threshold, benefiting people matters more the worse off those people are, the more of those people there are, and the greater the benefits in question. (iii) Above the threshold, no priority is to be assigned, and (iv) benefiting people matters more the more of those people there are, and the greater the benefits in question.

This version of sufficientarianism relaxes maximin by enlarging the group of people the benefits to whom have absolute priority. In addition, it determines the priority considerations among those who are below the threshold in accordance with (ii) and the priority considerations among those who are above it, in accordance with (iv). 'What is to happen above the threshold? One plausible view is utilitarianism above the threshold, but it is important to note that basing distribution on compassion below the threshold has no implication for what should happen above'.²⁰ Crisp's version of sufficiency is *absolutist*—it assigns absolute priority to the badly off; it is *single-level*—it says that there is only one morally privileged utility level; and finally, because of being single-level, it can be *heterogeneous*. That is, it recommends different patterns of distribution above the threshold (iv) and below it (ii).

In sum, we extracted three reasons for sufficientarianism; one is the clear intuition that above a certain threshold of well-being, priority considerations become irrelevant: differences at the very high levels do not matter at all, not even derivatively. This intuition supports a weak version of sufficientarianism, which is, as we have seen, a version of prioritarianism. The second reason is the feeling of some philosophers that the ideal of equality is a matter of sublimed (and still harmful) envy. This intuition is not really respected by any view we have so far considered, i.e. neither by weak sufficientarianism nor by the Crisp absolutist version of sufficiency. The third reason is responsible for Crisp's absolutist sufficientarianism: it counters the utilitarian aspect of prioritarianism (and weak sufficientarianism) by disallowing for aggregating all the way up. In Crisp's hands, sufficiency becomes a relaxed version of maximin.

2. The Challenge Absolute Sufficiency Faces

The challenge all versions of sufficientarianism have to address is quite heavy: how is the good-enough level to be determined? What is the nature of this threshold? After all, sufficientarians and prioritarians agree that if X is badly off and Y is well off, some priority should be assigned to benefiting X. But in the absence of one morally privileged threshold, the only nonegalitarian explanation of this conviction follows from the priority view. Indeed, skepticism with regard to the very existence of privileged utility thresholds is quite common among prioritarians. Thus, Richard Arneson claims:

One difficulty is how one nonarbitrarily sets the threshold level. Why here and not higher or lower? What we have is a smooth continuum of possible levels of overall capability for flourishing. ... I do not see how any unique level (not even a broad thick line) can be picked out such that if a person has that level, she has 'enough'.²¹

This can be understood as a direct attack on weak sufficientarianism. Suppose one person is extremely well off, living a life of heavenly bliss, and another person is living moderately well, just barely above the sufficiency line. According to sufficiency, there is no moral *priority-based* reason to choose between helping the person at the bliss level or helping instead the person at the moderate level.

In response, Crisp argues that it is no good to come up with examples like this one to attack sufficiency, since the sufficiency theorist will just advocate changing the threshold to fit the intuitions we all have about prioritization. In order to reject sufficiency, one has to respond to the cases in which people think no priority is to be given (such as Beverly Hills). Now I do think that this is a satisfying answer for weak sufficientarianism; unfortunately, however, it is unavailable to proponents of the stronger versions of the doctrine. For absolutists like Crisp, it is a two-edged sword. Once the threshold is set highly enough to accommodate the above objection, it becomes too high: it would be implausible to assign *absolute* priority to those just below this threshold. Why, it will be asked, should we prefer a tiny benefit to a person who is just below this high threshold to a large benefit to many people just above it?

Thus, skepticism with respect to the very existence of a morally significant utility threshold particularly threatens the stronger versions of the doctrine of sufficiency, which attach massive significance to this threshold. Remember *well-being continuity* (shared by weak sufficientarianism and prioritarianism): the moral importance of a benefit stands in *continuous* reverse proportion to the level of well-being (at which the recipient is situated). Proponents of the strong versions of sufficiency are committed to what might be called '*sufficientarian discontinuity*': benefiting a person just below the threshold is much more important than benefiting those who are just above it. Crisp believes that, from the point of view of distributive justice, it is infinitely more important to nontrivially benefit those who are just below the threshold. And in general, sufficientarian discontinuity implies that some small utility differences are (derivatively) significant, while others—much bigger differences—are not. In the abstract, it might be objected, that makes strong sufficiency cruder.

The objection, in other words, is as follows: Suppose that there is a priority line, as the doctrine of sufficiency holds. Suppose that a person X is just below it while Y is well above it. The separation between X and Y is (derivatively) significant, and we are required to give significant priority to X. Now suppose that X is only slightly better off, he is just barely above the 'good-enough level'. In this case, he and Y are both on the same side of the priority line. Therefore, X has no priority over Y. Yet, the separation between them is almost as great as it was in

the first case. In the objector's mind, to treat this minor shift in *X*'s level of well-being as having this kind of significance seems to be arbitrary.

3. Crisp's Defense of Sufficientarian Discontinuity

In defense of sufficientarian discontinuity, Crisp develops two different arguments. He first purports to attack the distributive moral intuitions favored by prioritariums, and then to advance a theoretical justification for the existence of a threshold. In order to understand Crisp's proposal, a preliminary remark should be made. Note that, at least on the face of it, our distributive intuitions are continuous with regard to two further factors, namely: the size of the benefit in question, and the number of potential recipients. Let me formulate these distributive intuitions. *Numbers/size continuity* says that the moral importance of a benefit stands in a *direct continuous proportion to the number of the beneficiaries/the size of the benefit*. The weighted priority view, as well as weak sufficientarianism, are continuous with respect to all three factors: size, number, and well-being.

Now, the challenge presented in the previous section focuses on well-being continuity, yet, Crisp seems to believe—at least in the first stage of his discussion—that all these forms of continuity stand or fall together. This is why he thinks that he can reject well-being continuity by refuting numbers continuity with the help of *Chocolate to the Well Off*.²² As we have seen, Crisp claims that the priority view requires giving tiny benefits to those who are very well off at a huge cost to the worst off, and that our intuitive responses to *Chocolate to the Well Off* strongly suggests that this should not be so. Numbers continuity, adopted by prioritarianism and weak sufficientarianism, must be false. In some cases, the numbers should not count. Thus, well-being continuity is false, as well: absolute priority is to be given to those who are below the threshold.

Crisp's other line of argument is theoretical. He builds a case for a sufficientarian threshold, and claims to reveal its massive significance.²³ In his view, there is a threshold of well-being such that a benevolent impartial observer would feel compassion towards people who are below this threshold. The impartial observer 'puts . . . herself into the shoes of all those affected, and is concerned more to the extent that the individual in question is badly off'.²⁴ Taking these preferences into account leads to assigning absolute priority to the badly off, that is, rejecting continuity with regard to all three factors. Thus, Crisp's absolutism should be understood as a result of the compassion principle:

Absolute sufficientarianism: (i) Absolute priority is to be given to those who are below the threshold after which compassion ceases. . . .

Crisp is rather uninformative with regard to where exactly compassion enters. At the bottom line, all he has to say about it is that 'compassion for any being *B* is appropriate up to the point at which *B* has a level of welfare such that *B* can live a life, which is sufficiently good'.²⁵ Probably Crisp believes that the notion of

compassion carries with it a more or less precise idea about the location of the good-enough level, and thus dissolves Arneson's skepticism.²⁶

So much for Crisp's two arguments for sufficientarian discontinuity; in the next section (4), I shall argue that both fail. Crisp's inference to numbers discontinuity from our responses to Chocolate to the Well Off is not an inference to the best explanation. Our responses to this case are to be explained in light of different principles; so there is no reason to forgo numbers continuity. Secondly, the compassion principle cannot relax the doubts Arneson raises with regard to the existence of a morally privileged utility threshold. In section 5 I shall offer a different argument for the existence of utility thresholds and well-being discontinuity. I shall end in section 6 by outlining a different version of the doctrine of sufficiency, which is strongly suggested by my arguments against the Crisp version. I shall advance an antiegalitarian, nonabsolutist, multilevel and homogenous version of the doctrine of sufficiency.

4. Rejecting Absolutism

Prioritarians might prefer a tiny benefit to a big group of well off people, even if the alternative is a substantive benefit to a small group of badly off people. Chocolate to the Well Off suggests that they are wrong. But does this case support Crisp's intuition that the numbers above the threshold should not count? And should it lead us to the absolutist version of the doctrine of sufficiency? Well, it should, if and only if the lesson to be drawn from Chocolate to the Well Off is absolutism that falsifies *well-being* continuity. But I think that the right analysis of our intuitive response has no such implication. My analysis of this case is based on a strong commitment to size continuity, which leaves place for numbers continuity, and hence, even if numbers, size, and well-being continuities fall together, Chocolate to the Well Off does not support well-being discontinuity.

To see this, note first that, as Crisp acknowledges, the absolutism to which he appeals in order to get to the correct ruling in Chocolate to the Well Off is obviously counterintuitive. It is vulnerable to an objection, which is very similar to Crisp's own objection to maximin. Absolute sufficiency prefers the smallest nontrivial benefit—good chocolate, say—to a very small number of individuals below the threshold to any benefit, no matter how large, to any number of individuals above the threshold. Call such type of cases Chocolate to the Badly Off.

Crisp argues that we should bite the bullet, and I shall criticize his argument later. But before doing so, I shall provide a tentative explanation of our intuitive response to the two cases under discussion. Our responses suggest, I believe, that whatever the condition of the recipients, the size of the potential benefit has *some* significance. True, in Chocolate to the Well Off we *prima facie* prefer benefiting the badly off because of their bad condition—that much is conceded by priority and weak sufficiency. There is, though, a further reason for this preference, namely: the greater size of the benefit in question. The same is true of Chocolate to the Badly Off; the fact that the badly off people would gain such a small benefit

is a significant fact in determining how important it is to help them—if the alternative is a large benefit to the well off. In other words, I suggest that size continuity is true, and that, possibly, numbers continuity is true. What explains our responses to the cases under discussion is, in part, that although numbers can outweigh size, the size of the benefit matters *more* than the numbers of the recipients. Let me clarify and argue for these claims.

Consider two further cases. Call the first Michelangelo. Here we might give a very good chocolate to each member who belongs to a large group of the badly off (they will gain tiny but nontrivial pleasure from it), or give the whole quantity to a great artist, whose life is already very good. Yet, for some reason this chocolate would bring the artist to perfection: thanks to it, he would paint something like the Sistine Chapel. Suppose, finally, that the amount of well-being the artist gains is smaller than the aggregate utility gained by the other individuals. Crisp's absolutism clearly prefers the badly off.

I think that it is needless to say that the size of the benefit given to the well off person in Michelangelo might outweigh the value of benefiting the people who are below the threshold, contrary to Crisp's absolutism. This can be seen also by the fact that the cross-personal aggregation of utility in Chocolate to the Well Off matters less than the size of the benefit in Michelangelo. The fact that a lot of well off people gain nontrivial benefit is not as morally significant as the fact that one well off person reaches perfection. Thus, Michelangelo points to an important ethical truth: numbers matters less than size. In Michelangelo we prefer the well off person because of the size of the benefit he would gain. Of course, the exact weight of size relative to the weight of numbers should be made more explicit. Still, Michelangelo strongly suggests that, given a very significant amount of utility u , the importance of u is greater, the lesser is the number of people to whom u is equally distributed.²⁷

The greater moral weight of the size of the potential benefit, compared to the weight of the numbers of potential beneficiaries, can be shown by another case, which I call One Pleasant Day to the Sick. We can invest in a medicine that would enable one young person who suffers from a deadly disease to live a normal life. The other 99,999 equally young people who suffer from the same disease will die in two days. With the same amount of resources we can develop a medicine that will enable the whole group (100,000 people) one day of very pleasant life. Let us stipulate that this option yields more cross-personal aggregate utility than the utility gained by the medicine that completely cures only one person. Below the threshold, Crisp's view is numbers-continuous. Hence, he would recommend the second option. This seems implausible to me. If I am correct, the size of the benefit matters more than the number of the recipients.

Among other principles, the principle that size matters more than numbers explains our responses to Chocolate to the Badly Off and Chocolate to the Well Off: in both cases we prefer size to numbers. Thus, the former case does not prove numbers discontinuity and (even if Crisp is right that numbers continuity and well-being continuity fall together) cannot support well-being discontinuity.

Some philosophers remained unconvinced by the above examples. The response might be put as follows: 'there may well be utilitarian or perfectionist reasons to favor Michelangelo, but not reasons of justice'. I have two points to make in response: first, the above objection ignores a crucial feature of sufficientarianism and prioritarianism. Both theories are versions of weighted utilitarianism. One major advantage of these versions of utilitarianism is that they successfully embrace what is traditionally considered to be verdicts of justice and fairness; both realize, for instance, the special importance of benefiting the badly off people. Hence the distinction between reasons of justice and utilitarian/perfectionist reasons is misplaced. Michelangelo reveals a further factor that determines the *moral* weight of utility: u is morally more valuable the lesser is the number of people to whom it is distributed.

Having said this, it should be admitted that another issue might be involved in Michelangelo, to which the doctrine sufficiency is *insensitive*. Suppose that a distributor can either equally divide a significant amount of utility u between two people, or benefit only one of them. The importance of u is greater the lesser is the number of people to whom u is distributed. Still, if the distributor has no cogent reason to benefit one rather than the other, it would be arbitrary and disrespectful to do so. Impartiality requires equal treatment in such a case, and this usually outweighs the special importance of the size.

It might be further objected that the claim that numbers matters less than size is rejected in our political life. For (the objection goes), implemented as policy, the principle yields what public-choice theorists criticize as special-interest politics. Consider the following facts about free trade: it benefits a very large number of people (all consumers of the freely traded product, plus the producers who win out in the competition to sell them by providing the goods at the lowest price). But it also concentrates high costs on a small number of people (the producers who lose their jobs when trade barriers are removed). The net gains of free trade are large, but distributed over a large number of people, in small doses. Hence the objection: applying the principle that numbers matters less than size, we should ban free trade in any domestically produced products, where the competing producers are at the same threshold of well-being. We should never have reduced trade barriers between the US and Western Europe.

I think, however, that such cases support the principle rather than speak against it. The fact that a small group of people would suffer a tremendous harm because of a new policy that is intended to benefit the masses is a very strong reason against this policy. And, in the case we opt for such a policy, we tend to compensate this harmed group for its great loss. Thus, the policy is justified only if the numbers are big *enough*. Free trade is justified because of its *dramatic* impact; small positive impact in terms of cross-personal aggregate utility won't justify the great loss suffered by a small group of people. Thus, size matters more than number, although very big numbers might defeat the special importance of size.

I thus conclude that (at least) as far as the right lesson from Chocolate to the Well Off is concerned, size continuity might well be true (hence, Crisp's

absolutism fails) and the questions whether numbers continuity is true, or to what extent the numbers count, should be left open. Indeed, whether or not one finds my alternative analyses plausible, it should be agreed, I think, that well-being continuity—the real issue between priority (/weak sufficiency) and strong sufficiency—can be isolated and decided independently of other forms of continuity.

Thus, Crisp's theoretical case for the existence of a threshold that justifies discontinuity is of crucial importance: it has to tackle Arneson's skepticism, and to do it in a way that justifies strong sufficientarianism in general, and Crisp's absolutistic ruling in *Chocolate for the Badly Off*, in particular. But the argument cannot shoulder the burden. For, in Crisp's view, 'the virtue ascribed to the spectator is a "theorized" version'²⁸ of the ordinary virtue of compassion. And this notion of compassion is theorized to such an extent that it cannot do the theoretical job it is supposed to do. Or so I shall argue.

Here is an illustration of the distance between the ordinary and the theorized notions of compassion. Crisp says, 'a compassionate person will show concern for someone suffering a headache, even if they are very well off [that is, far above the threshold]'.²⁹ Since this person is well off, the feelings of the impartial observer towards him would not be classified as compassion, but rather as mere benevolence. Consider another feature of Crisp's notion of theorized compassion. In his critique of Crisp, Temkin³⁰ claims that compassion is an unjust consultant: it is insensitive to considerations that regard desert. After all, compassion for people who are suffering is appropriate, even where these people deserve the pains inflicted on them. Crisp rejoins that he appeals to 'a modified form of compassion that "tracks" just claims—thus enabling us to use the model of the spectator as an heuristic in seeking to understand what justice requires'.³¹

If so, I argue, the principle of compassion is unable to dissolve Arneson's skepticism even regarding weak sufficientarianism. That is, if the compassion of the impartial observer is theorized to that extent—if some of her feelings towards pained people are (dis)regarded as 'mere' benevolence, and some painful sufferings do not generate compassion at all—the prioritarian claim that 'compassion' (in Crisp's sense) is relevant, however well off the potential recipients are, is not really challenged by weak sufficientarianism. In the priority view, in case people are suffering pains, the impartial observer would feel compassion towards them, no matter how well off they are. In the prioritarian's view the reason is simple: the level at which life is 'good enough' is absolute perfection, where the amount of well-being cannot be exceeded. Now, on the one hand, this claim cannot be rejected on the basis of what is conceptually true of our ordinary notion of compassion. On the other, claiming that this prioritarian notion of compassion fails to 'track' just claims is a mere restatement of (weak) sufficientarian convictions.

Let me put this point another way. We are faced by two intuitions. The first, stressed by weak sufficientarianism, is that it does not matter whether fine wines go to the super-rich or to the rich. The other is that there are priority-based

reasons for preventing pain from the super-rich, so that it is *prima facie* more important than giving good chocolate to the badly off. Crisp rejects the second intuition and adopts the first. With respect to the first, he argues from the lack of compassion towards the rich. With respect to the second, he argues that the compassion we feel towards the pained super-rich does not 'track' justice. It seems obvious to me that he has to explain the difference between these two cases by developing an independent criterion for justice.

Now Crisp believes that once one has internalized his notion of compassion, his absolutist reasoning in Chocolate to the Badly Off would become unproblematic. In his view, we might prefer tiny but significant benefit to the badly off people to benefits of whatever size to the well off people. This sufficientarian ruling, says Crisp, 'may not be as implausible as it seems, once we give proper recognition to the fact that the threshold is the point at which compassion no longer applies'.³² In Crisp's view, this consideration alone justifies his absolutist ruling. But suppose that my above argument is sound; suppose, that is, that Crisp has to explain how he distinguishes compassion that 'tracks' justice from compassion which fails to do it. If so, he is not entitled to use the theorized notion of compassion in order to weaken the intuitive resistance to absolutism. Compassion is *defined* as an emotion that 'tracks' just claims. It cannot play any role in a noncircular argument which aims to show that a controversial ruling is just.

5. In Defense of Well-Being (Sufficientarian) Discontinuity³³

So the real task strong sufficientarianism should undertake is defending sufficientarian discontinuity with regard to well-being. It has to explain why small changes in the level of well-being of the recipient do make a 'disproportionally' big moral difference, while other big differences do not matter at all.

I aim, in this section, to show that there are thresholds that justify³⁴ discontinuity, and then explain away the philosophical belief in well-being continuity, by pointing to its illegitimate origin. I shall show that there are (at least) three thresholds within the well-being space such that, if X and Y are separated by one of them, benefiting X has priority over benefiting Y. In addition, I shall show that when X and Y are both above one line and below the subsequent one, X has no priority over Y, however big the well-being difference between them. This would allow me to account (in the next section) for the antiegalitarian conviction expressed (and then deserted) by Crisp.

I call the thresholds I reveal the 'luxury threshold', the 'pain threshold' (which is deeply related to the 'poverty threshold'), and the 'personhood threshold'. I shall begin by arguing for the last one in some detail and then, with its help, explain away the philosophical belief in well-being continuity. Then, I shall show that the others are usually presumed by most ethical theories of distribution.

5.1 The Threshold of Personhood

My defense premises, firstly, that humans' life is better than animals' life. Indeed, as Crisp³⁵ and McMahan remark,³⁶ most of us adopt this Millian belief or, at least, we believe that for a person to become a satisfied pig is for him to become very badly off. Secondly, I assume that we are persons by virtue of the higher psychological capacities that distinguish persons from animals. Call these capacities person-making capacities.

These two premises make the crucial third premise very plausible: the scale of X's well-being partly overlaps the scale that measures his person-making capacities. In particular, a small change in the amount or strength of the person-making capacities one has usually causes a proportionally small change in one's condition, i.e. a small change in the level of well-being at which one is. This belief would be adopted by most theories of well-being; think, for instance, of a comparison between humans and nonhumans regarding the so-called 'desire accounts' of welfare. Human desires are more numerous and more complex than those of nonhumans. Hence, usually, the greater our capacity to generate complex desires, the better off we are.³⁷

This overlap notwithstanding, our concept of person is, so to speak, a 'threshold concept' rather than a 'graded concept'—being a person is an all-or-nothing state of affairs. True, person-making capacities come in degrees. Yet, once one's capacities are above a certain threshold in terms of amount and strength, he is a person, rather than 'a person to some degree'. There is, therefore, a threshold of personhood. And in light of my third premise, this threshold corresponds to a level of well-being. That is to say that at some point—when one is just above the threshold of personhood (in terms of well-being)—a *small* fall in one's condition would cause him to lose his status as person.³⁸ I finally suppose that when one *falls* below *this* threshold, one's life is not worth living anymore. It does not follow, of course, that nonhumans have lives that are not worth living: still, by *losing* one's status as a person, one's life becomes not worth living. Not having such a status to begin with is a different issue. (I do not argue for this premise, but just point to the fact that it is widely held.)³⁹

It is easy to see that the threshold of personhood as described here is one of the morally privileged utility levels sufficientarians seek. Suppose that X is just above this threshold and that, although Y's life is bad, he is far above it. Suppose, in addition, that a certain amount of resources is necessary to secure X's status as person. Now enter the well-being scale: let us stipulate that being just above the personhood threshold is being just above -30. Without the resources (to be distributed between X and Y), X would fall to -31 (i.e. below the personhood threshold). Y is at -25, and these resources would raise him to -20. The resources would benefit Y more than they would benefit X. I think that most of us would feel that it is morally urgent to benefit X, and that this normative fact is fully explained by the fact that X is about to lose his moral status as a person. On the other hand, suppose the well-being difference between X and Y is as big as in the previous case, i.e. both are badly off, but now, although X is barely above the

threshold of personhood, his status as person is secured. The particular priority of benefiting X over benefiting Y sensed in the previous case *entirely* disappears. Or so I believe.

If I am correct, the existence of the threshold of personhood proves the existence of a privileged utility threshold, which refutes well-being continuity. Again: in terms of size of well-being, Y would benefit more from the resources to be distributed between him and X. And had X not been under danger of losing his status as a person, the priority we attached to benefiting him would disappear. The resources would secure X's personhood, while nothing of comparable significance is at stake in Y's enjoying the resources. But *this* consideration is 'discontinuous': had X been *slightly* better off, the priority assigned to him would be nullified.

5.2 Explaining Away Continuous Intuitions

I am now in a position to dissolve the prioritarian objection, according to which, in the abstract, sufficientarian discontinuity is implausible. I shall argue that, in fact, we—as philosophers—are more vulnerable to this false belief than others.

Consider the explanandum: a one-unit benefit to X has a special moral importance. In explaining this normative fact, priority and sufficiency appeal to different properties and use different terms. In the priority view, we have a cardinal scale that measures a person's condition, and yields interpersonal comparability. The level of well-being determines the weight of a one-unit benefit to a person at this level. Call the properties represented by the cardinal scale 'p-properties', and the terms that express them, 'p-terms'.

Compare p-properties to the properties to which sufficientarians appeal in their explanation, namely: properties of the types being badly off, living a life that is not worth living, etc. Call them 's-properties'. In order to admit s-properties, sufficientarians presume the prioritarian scale, but, in addition, they introduce utility thresholds that qualitatively divide it. We have stipulated, for example, that being below the personhood threshold is *vaguely* or *proximally* being below -30. That is, s-properties seem to be no more than an imprecise disjunction of p-properties. Moreover, due to the intrinsic vagueness of the s-properties, and the belief that vague properties supervene upon precise ones,⁴⁰ s-properties seem to strongly *supervene* upon p-properties. Strong supervenience generates a hierarchy between the supervening properties and the supervened properties. Thus, s-properties are conceived to be less basic than p-properties—and this means that every fact explained in s-terms can be explained in p-terms.

But this is wrong. Indeed, this is the mistake that generates the philosophical belief in well-being continuity. To see why this is wrong, consider how we lose sight of the unique normative role s-properties play. Consider the explanandum again, and suppose that, in the doctrine of sufficiency, it is explained by the fact that X's life is not worth living. Yet, since being not worth living is a vague property, we tend to use the prioritarian scale in order to express it. It is assumed,

therefore, that the fact that X's life is not worth living, as well as *its normative implication*, can be explained by facts composed of the more precise p-properties. As a result, it seems to us that, rather than s-properties per se, what normatively matters are the p-properties. And then, well-being continuity seems to be inevitable. For there is no qualitative difference *that can be put in p-terms* between the p-properties expressed by the homogenous prioritarian scale.

Once we know why well-being continuity seems to us appealing, it is clear that we should resist any *a priori* commitment to it. There are obvious counterexamples to the claim that the basic level is metaphysically or explanatorily exhaustive. One of them is the case we have just discussed. In terms of 'quantity' of well-being, it is possible that one's ceasing to be a person is just a small change in one's condition. Yet, put in s-terms, this is not a 'small' change, in any interesting sense: being a person is an all-or-nothing state of affairs. Thus, the reason we sense that it is urgent to secure one's status as person cannot be put in p-terms. If priority is to be assigned to X in virtue of the s-property he instantiated, p-properties are relevant only insofar as having one of them implies having the relevant s-property. Similarly, sufficientarians argue that what explains the normative fact that X has a special moral claim is that he is below a certain threshold. This fact might be put in precise terms, but once this is done, its normative import disappears.⁴¹

5.3 Higher Thresholds

In any plausible version of sufficiency there must be some other privileged utility thresholds, aside from the threshold of personhood. This threshold is the lowest. And as Frankfurt says, '... what is morally important is ... that each person have enough. By "enough" I mean ... enough for a good life ... not merely enough to get by'.⁴² I shall show that there are higher thresholds whose significance justifies sufficientarian discontinuity.

Let me begin with two observations: first, our judgments about how well a person fares are usually time-indexed. He might fare well at a certain time and fare badly at another; the quality of his life as a whole depends, in a complicated way, on how well he fared at the different moments that constitute his life. Second, consider the way we evaluate an outcome in terms of utility. Typically, an outcome is better to the extent that people in the outcome in question fare better. Now, some moments in a person's life might have *negative* welfare value to him. Undeserved pains, for example, would worsen an outcome (with regard to utility) because the times at which they occur have negative welfare value to the people who bear the pains. The point at which our utilitarian calculation takes a momentary welfare value to be negative to a person is, I think, far from being arbitrary or conventional. For one thing, the pain/pleasure distinction is qualitative and morally significant.⁴³

Sufficientarian discontinuity has a simple analysis of the special significance of pains. It presumes a cardinal scale that measures one's well-being *at a specific*

time, where the welfare value of the time of a painful experience is negative to the one who is bound to bear it.

Suppose then that X might suffer a painful experience, such that the welfare value of *t* to him would be -1. A pill might prevent this experience (and thus the welfare value of *t* to X would be 0). The same pill would give Y great pleasure, such that the welfare value of *t* to Y would be 10. There is no further relevant difference between X and Y. A strong enough sufficientarian discontinuity with regard to pains argues, first, that the pill should go to X despite the fact that Y would convert the pill to more utility. That is, the importance of preventing pain defeats (in some cases) the importance of the size of the benefit to Y. Second, sufficientarian discontinuity argues that this type of priority completely disappears if the welfare value of *t* to a third person Z is 0, and the pill would raise it to 1. Benefiting Z (who is at 0) would have no '*pain priority*' over benefiting Y. To me, this seems very plausible.⁴⁴

Crucial to my argument is that this time-indexed threshold is completely unrelated to the personhood threshold. In other words, the property of a life that it is not worth living should not be understood only in the terms of pain, suffering, frustration, etc. To see why this is so, suppose that, in the last twenty years of his life, Einstein invested most of his time in searching for a unified field theory. He was mostly frustrated, and by the end of his life, desperate. Utilitarian calculation would take it that these experiences of frustration worsen the relevant outcome. But it does not follow that Einstein's life in this period was not worth living.

There is, however, another threshold that *is* deeply related to the notions with the help of which the pain threshold is to be characterized. As noted, facts about momentary welfare value form the basis for judgments about how good are the lives that are constituted by these moments. We understand the notions of living a poor life or being needy, for example, as conceptually related to the notions of suffering, pain, frustration, etc. Hence, if sufficientarian discontinuity is true with regard to pain, it would naturally be extended to the priority assigned to benefiting the poor and the needy. Probably, the poverty line that is sought by welfare states parallels this threshold: a person is below this threshold if it is predictable that his life would be filled with pain and frustration as a result of a lack of material resources.

Finally, the high threshold exposed by Crisp's Beverly Hills example is surely a salient threshold. I shall call it the luxury threshold. Contra Crisp, I believe that it is a time-indexed threshold to the same extent to which the pain threshold is time-indexed. Those who are above this threshold at a certain time are so well off at that time that every *small*⁴⁵ benefit to them would be a luxury. They could use the resources allocated to them for another vacation, for consuming even better wines, or for having the honor of being listed as one of the richest people in the world. Sufficientarian discontinuity says, with regard to luxuries, that benefiting a person who fares moderately well has priority over benefiting those who are above the luxury threshold. And, as usual with sufficientarian thresholds, once a person is above the threshold, priority considerations (of this type) are irrelevant, while if he is just below it, the priority assigned to benefiting him is substantial.

6. A Multilevel, Nonabsolutist, Homogeneous Version of the Doctrine of Sufficiency

Let me put all this together in order to construct what seems to me to be the most plausible version of the doctrine of sufficiency. Recall the bottom lines of the previous sections: in section 1 we saw that, although Crisp rejects equality (rather than rephrase it in a prioritarian way) the version of sufficiency he provides does not motivate such a rejection. In constructing a version of sufficiency I shall adopt his Millian diagnosis as to why our ancestors who developed the notion of comparative unfairness tended to value equality. This was just a matter of envy. Moreover, human envious nature is responsible for the prioritarian belief that if X is worse off than Y we should *prima facie* prefer benefiting X to benefiting Y. In my version of the doctrine, both built-in biases towards equality are rejected. First, it is *not* the case that, *whenever* X is worse off than Y, benefits to X are *prima facie* morally preferable to benefits to Y. Also, it is not the case that whenever X is worse off than Y, and Y is below a threshold, benefits to X are *prima facie* morally preferable to benefits to Y.

In section 4 we saw that absolutism is unacceptable. A plausible version of sufficiency should leave the moral significance of numbers open, and would be strongly committed to size-continuity. I shall thus offer a nonabsolutist version of sufficiency. Finally, in light of the discussion in section 5, I shall assume that there is more than one utility threshold. Thus, my version of sufficiency would be multilevel. This has an important implication. While, in the Crisp version, basing distribution below the threshold on compassion implies nothing for what should happen above it, my version of sufficiency tells us what should happen when X and Y are separated by some thresholds, but also when they are separated by none. Thus, apart from being nonabsolutist and multileveled, my version of sufficiency would be homogenous: it has a unified attitude to both types of distribution. When a threshold separates X and Y, one-unit benefit to X is more important than one-unit benefit to Y. When no priority line separates X and Y, the antiegalitarian aspect of sufficiency comes to the surface: well-being differences among people who are between succeeding thresholds have no moral significance at all, not even derivative significance.

This comes down to this formula:

The multilevel doctrine of sufficiency: benefiting people matters more, the more priority lines there are above the utility level at which these people are, the more of those people there are, and the greater the size of the benefit in question. But, the number of beneficiaries matters less than the size of the benefit.

Two further desirable features of the above version are noteworthy: first, it fares better with differences between people that are above the good-enough level. It sounds unconvincing that those who live barely above the sufficiency line won't have any priority over the extremely well off. Crisp's version, because of being single-level, says that priority above the threshold is irrelevant. On the multilevel view, it is possible that there is at least one priority line that separates a

person who lives moderately well from a person who lives at the luxury level. Indeed, in the view I recommend, priority of different types might be relevant all the way up until this high threshold.

Secondly, strict commitment to size continuity enables sufficientarians to avoid one of the most embarrassing implications of absolutism. Crisp plausibly assumes that animals are below the good-enough level. Unfortunately, his view implies that we should assign absolute priority to benefiting them. Crisp might believe that it is just common-sense speciesism that leads us away from this view. I think, however, that this is a wrong diagnosis. The reason we tend to disagree is obvious enough, but it cannot be recognized within Crisp's absolutism: benefits to humans tend to be much larger than benefits to animals. According to the nonabsolutist view, the size of a benefit is always morally significant.⁴⁶

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NOTES

¹ Frankfurt 1988: 134. His argument against the ideal of economic equality can be extended to any kind of egalitarian ideal

² See Crisp 2003; idem 2003a. The latter article is a response to Larry Temkin's critique of the former. See Temkin 2003.

³ Benbaji 2005.

⁴ The term 'comparative equality' draws on Temkin 2001: Part I, sect. A.

⁵ Frankfurt 1988; Temkin 2001. For the full discussion, see Temkin 1993; McKerlie 1994; idem 1989; Anderson 1999; Parfit 1995. Cf. Benbaji 2006.

⁶ For a short statement, see Temkin 2001.

⁷ See Parfit 1995.

⁸ See McKerlie 1989.

⁹ Crisp 2003: 752.

¹⁰ In fact, matters are more complicated. Some philosophers argue, in light of the leveling down objection, that equality is a *conditional* but still an *intrinsic* value (see Mason 2001). In their view, the fact that equality is intrinsically valuable *somewhere* does not imply that it is valuable *everywhere* (see Kagan 1988). Indeed, a distributive ethics whose verdicts are identical to the priority view can be interpreted along these lines. Others, however, take the priority view to produce equality merely as a *by-product*.

¹¹ Richard Arneson characterizes his version of prioritarianism as 'a close cousin of . . . egalitarianism'. See Arneson 2000: 341.

¹² Crisp 2003: 749. Crisp notes, though, that this is merely a hypothesis (p. 750); cf. idem 2003a: 123–25.

¹³ See Frankfurt 1999: sect. 2.

¹⁴ Frankfurt 1988: 136.

¹⁵ Temkin 1987: 165 n. 28.

¹⁶ Temkin 1987: 146.

¹⁷ Crisp 2003: 755.

¹⁸ If, unlike me, but like a referee of this paper, you are a nonchocoholic, think of a benefit that is far more clearly substantial, like a week's release from pain.

¹⁹ Crisp 2003: 752.

²⁰ Crisp 2003: 758.

²¹ Arneson 2000: 56; see also idem 1999.

²² See Crisp 2003: 753–55, and my reservation in the next footnote.

²³ In fact, he claims that the weighted priority view can be replaced by the following:

The number-weighted priority view: Benefiting people matters more the worse off those people are, the more of those people there are, and the larger the benefits in question. But the number of beneficiaries matters less the better off they are. (Crisp 2003: 754)

Thus, Chocolate to the Well Off does not lead directly to Crisp's version of the doctrine of sufficiency. Indeed, as he puts it, the compassion principle (see below) should be inferred from the Beverly Hills case (presented above in sect. 1). Yet, Crisp's defense of *discontinuity* cannot be understood unless he takes it to be supported by the intuitive response to Chocolate to the Well Off. The reason is simple: even if prioritarian concern disappears entirely once the recipients are at a certain level of well-being, continuity might still be true.

²⁴ Crisp 2003: 756–57.

²⁵ Ibid: 762.

²⁶ Ibid: 757, n. 30.

²⁷ My principle, 'size matters more than numbers', is related to the belief of Rachels and Temkin that a life constituted by 32,000 years of hangnails is better than a life of the same length which includes two years of unbearable torture (Temkin 1996). In fact, this principle is a generalization of the 'Minimize Great Additional Burdens View' for which Larry Temkin argued in his recent paper, Temkin 2005. He claims that 'in general, if additional burdens are dispersed among different people, it is preferable for a given total burden to be dispersed among a vastly larger number of people, so that the additional burden any single person has to bear within her life is relatively small, than for a smaller total burden to fall on just a few, such that their additional burden is substantial' (p. 219). Temkin reports, however, that he had to break the general principle into two parts—one dealing with burdens, and the other, with benefits. This is mainly for rhetorical purposes, since some people are persuaded by the burdens side of the equation, but less convinced by the benefits side (personal correspondence).

²⁸ Crisp 2003: 757.

²⁹ Ibid: 758.

³⁰ Temkin 2003: 772.

³¹ Crisp 2003a: 120.

³² Crisp 2003: 758.

³³ Compare my argument in this section to Griffin's argument in Griffin 1986: 85–89, and to Temkin's argument for intransitivity in Temkin 1996, esp. 190–91.

³⁴ I propose an argument for the existence of one good-enough level in Benbaji 2005.

³⁵ Crisp 2003: 760.

³⁶ Thus, McMahan says, 'a good contributes more to the value of a life to the extent that it has been continued to be desired when it occurs. If so, we should discount the value of most of the goods in an animal's life, which tend to arrive unbidden and indeed unanticipated, for the absence of prior desire. And a similar claim may be true with respect to desert. It may be that a good contributes more to the value of a life to the extent that it is deserved when it occurs. But since, in general, desert presupposes responsibility and animals are not responsible agents, their deserts, if any, are sparse and attenuated' (McMahan 2001: 197).

³⁷ Now, it might be argued that this is true only to the extent that we can satisfy the complex desires that are generated by our higher capacities. Presumably, the objection goes, some people are good at satisfying their complex desires and others aren't. Thus, the link between person-making capacities and welfare level is highly contingent. I think that the objection is misdirected. First, rational persons control their complex desires: they rid themselves of expensive tastes in case they cannot satisfy them. Rationality is, of course, a person-making capacity. Second, consider the Socratic conception of well-being, according to which some complex desires (for truth, justice, etc.) are necessary for one's well-being even if they are unsatisfied. Indeed, it seems to me very plausible that a person who is interested in the real value of his work is better off than a person who has no such interest. This is strongly supported by the preferences of competent judges: most people would greatly prefer to sustain this kind of desire.

³⁸ Note, however, that this change in one's well-being might be relatively big if, as is the case in reality, the threshold of personhood has a very thick penumbra around it.

³⁹ One might argue that if a person were to lose his status as a person, but gains a huge increase in pleasurable mental states, his life would still be worth living. I disagree, and I think that my belief is in accordance with the common view. Suppose a person who is already suffering from a painful disease receives a brain injury that reduces him to the mental condition of a *contented* infant. This would be widely regarded as a great misfortune. And it seems to me that it would be perfectly rational to prefer the previous condition to the current one, despite the fact that now the person does not suffer pains. Indeed, preferring death to the condition of severely reduced mental capacity seems very natural.

Note, additionally, that I do not claim that any event of ceasing to be a person results in a life falling below a sufficiency threshold. A person's death, for example, does not necessarily make a person badly off. Rather, I claim that in any case in which a person survives but ceases to be a person, s/he falls below the lowest utility threshold. In such a case, I assume—and believe that my assumption is widely shared—the personhood threshold is not explicable by reference to the size of benefit involved in maintaining personhood, but rather by the importance of the individual being above rather than below this threshold. For, to repeat, a person might lose his personhood by a small fall in his/her person-making capacities. And, the scale that measures one's level of person-making capacities partly overlaps the scale that measures one's level of well-being.

⁴⁰ Russell famously argued that there are no vague properties at all. Vagueness is a defect of natural languages. See Russell 1983. See also T. Williamson's discussion of this view in Williamson 1994: 107, 202.

⁴¹ Compare the objection to include colors and wavelengths in the same 'explanatory space', in Campbell 1993: 257–68, esp. 262, and in Johnston 1992.

⁴² Frankfurt 1999: 146.

⁴³ It does not follow that every pain worsens an outcome, yet the fact that something is a painful experience plays a crucial role in explaining the negative value attached to it.

⁴⁴ Consider the following case: I can either (a) prevent X's pain or (b) provide similar increase for Y. The pain threshold suggests that I should bring about (a). And now suppose that Y is willing to pay to X for suffering this pain. Wouldn't the pain threshold still imply that I should bring about (a), even if it is in both X's and Y's interest that I bring about (b)? A positive answer seems counterintuitive. Generally, the problem can be put as follows. Pain and pleasure are different things, so any scale to measure them is likely to itself be reflective of one's evaluation of them. So if one thinks that relieving the pain matters more than providing the benefit, a utilitarian is likely to claim that the pain must be represented by a larger negative number than the pleasure's positive number.

In reply, I would argue that the objector's redescription of the case is possible. Yet, it misses the continuous nature of the hedonic space—and its close relation to the utility we assign to experiences by virtue of their hedonic features. The moral difference between pain and pleasure is more naturally described through the *value* or the *weight* of the utility they generate.

⁴⁵ Big benefits might bring them to perfection, and since size continuity is true and size matters more than numbers this benefit might defeat the special importance of benefiting those who are below the threshold.

⁴⁶ I would like to thank Hagit Benbaji and anonymous referees for their comments on this paper. I am indebted, in particular, to Roger Crisp for his very helpful criticism of this paper.

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