

Basic Needs and Sufficiency: The Foundations of Intergenerational Justice

Lukas H. Meyer and Thomas Pölzler

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter addresses a theory of intergenerational justice that is referred to as *needs-based sufficientarianism*. According to needs-based sufficientarianism, the present generation ought to enable future generations to meet their basic needs—for example, their needs for drinkable water, food, and healthcare. The authors' aim is to explain and defend this theory in a programmatic way. First, they introduce what they regard as the most plausible variant of needs-based sufficientarianism. Then, they argue that this variant is superior to several alternative ways of thinking about intergenerational justice. In particular, they defend basic needs as the currency of intergenerational justice and sufficiency as its principle. Their arguments for these claims do not purport to be fully comprehensive nor fully conclusive. Yet, the authors hope that they suffice to show that needs-based sufficientarianism is a major contender, with significant pro tanto advantages over other views.

Keywords: intergenerational justice, future generation, basic need, sufficientarianism, needs-based sufficientarianism

1. Introduction

The interests of currently living and future persons sometimes conflict. Consider activities which emit greenhouse gases as a side effect (e.g., driving cars, heating houses, or producing factory goods). While these activities benefit many currently living persons, they also bring about climatic changes that will cause significant harm to persons living in the (distant) future. In our view, intergenerational conflicts of interest such as this can give rise to duties of distributive justice.¹

What do these duties look like? In response to this question philosophers have developed various theories of intergenerational justice (see, e.g., Caney, 2009; Rawls, 1999, pp. 251–67). This chapter is about a theory which we will henceforth refer to as *needs-based sufficientarianism*. According to needs-based sufficientarianism, the present generation first

and foremost ought to enable future generations to meet their basic needs—for example, their needs for drinkable water, food, and healthcare. Only once this lexically prior duty is fulfilled can other principles of intergenerational justice or non-justice-based moral principles come into play. Our aim in this chapter is to explain and defend intergenerational needs-based sufficientarianism in a programmatic way.

This theory involves two main claims: (1) that basic needs are the appropriate currency of intergenerational justice and (2) that sufficiency is its appropriate principle. Both of these claims have been explained and defended in the context of intragenerational justice (largely independently from each other; see, e.g., Crisp, 2003; Doyal & Gough, 1991; Frankfurt, 1987; Wiggins, 1998). Moreover, sufficientarianism has also been addressed with regard to relations between non-contemporaries, in particular in the context of climate change (see, e.g., Baatz, 2014; Baatz & Voget-Kleschin, 2019; Meyer & Roser, 2009; Shue, 1993; Wolf, 2009).² Yet, taken as a whole and in its specific intergenerational context, scholars' understanding of needs-based sufficientarianism is still insufficient. One way in which our chapter will advance debates about intergenerational justice is by synthesizing, clarifying, and improving existing arguments for needs-based sufficientarianism. We will also show how basic needs as the currency and sufficiency as the principle of intergenerational justice mutually support each other.

Here is how we will proceed. In the next section we introduce what we regard as the most plausible variant of needs-based sufficientarianism. Then, we argue that this variant is superior to several alternative ways of thinking about intergenerational justice. In particular, we defend first basic needs as the currency of intergenerational justice (Section 3) and then sufficiency as the principle of intergenerational justice (Section 4). We are aware that the arguments that we put forward for these claims are neither fully comprehensive nor fully conclusive. Yet, we hope that they suffice to show that needs-based sufficientarianism is a major contender, with significant pro tanto advantages over other views.

2. Needs-Based Sufficientarianism

For any theory of intergenerational justice (and distributive justice in general) to be comprehensive it must specify who should get how much of what by whom (Page, 2007a, p. 51). What entities are the legitimate claimants of benefits³ (this is the question of *claimants*)? What level and distribution of benefits and burdens are these entities entitled to (this is the question of the *principle of justice*)? What is the appropriate conception of these benefits and burdens (this is the question of the *currency of justice*)? And what entities stand under duties to bring about the fair distribution of benefits and burdens (this is the question of *duty bearers*)?

In this chapter we do not investigate the questions of who the claimants and duty bearers are. When one argues within the framework of liberal political philosophy, a plausible starting assumption might be that individual persons are the legitimate claimants of benefits and burdens and that states are the duty bearers.⁴ The claims of needs-based suffi-

cientarianism that we purport to support in this chapter concern the other two questions, the questions of the principle and currency of intergenerational justice. In our view present and future individuals are entitled to a sufficient level of benefits (principle of sufficiency), and these benefits are to be conceived of in terms of basic needs (currency of basic needs). Let us clarify these two claims in turn, beginning with the latter.

2.1 A Plausible Conception of Basic Needs

The most obvious question with regard to basic needs as the currency of intergenerational justice is how to understand these needs. Sometimes this question is answered by simply providing a list of purported basic needs (which may include items such as food, water, health, or shelter) (see, e.g., Drewnowski, 1966; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1973). But such answers are unsatisfactory. Lists of basic needs are always to some extent controversial and do not provide us with an explanation of why the fulfillment of these needs matters. Proponents of needs-based sufficientarianism must therefore (also) provide a substantive definition of basic needs: a definition that specifies in virtue of what a thing qualifies as a basic need.

Drawing on Wiggins (1998, pp. 6–9), discussants of basic needs typically distinguish between instrumental and absolute needs.⁵ Instrumental needs are needs for specific purposes. For example, Charlie might claim that he needs \$1000 to buy a new iPhone. If it is true that paying \$1000 is the only way to get a new iPhone, then, in an instrumental sense, it is true that Charlie needs \$1000. Needs of this kind raise the question of whether their purpose is needed as well. For example, while Charlie needs \$1000 to buy a new iPhone, does he really need a new iPhone? Absolute needs, in contrast, are needs that do not admit of such follow-up questions. This is because with these needs their purpose is predefined: It is the avoidance of harm. For a person to need something in an absolute sense accordingly means that in the absence of the person having, being, or realizing this thing, the person is harmed; they “cannot get on without” this thing, as Wiggins (1998, p. 9) puts it; their lives “will be blighted without it.”

Basic needs are best thought of as a subclass of absolute needs. On our preferred definition—which somewhat deviates from Wiggins’⁶—they differ from other kinds of absolute needs in that the harm that arises from their non-fulfillment is both necessary and serious. That the harm is necessary means that it does not occur because of the specific environment or constitution of the needing individual but rather because of laws of nature or presently highly invariable facts about human environments and constitutions (Wiggins, 1998, p. 15).⁷ That the harm is serious means that it is of a great magnitude (Wiggins, 1998, p. 14). As an example, suppose a person lacks food. This lack may cause serious harm such as apathy, organ damage, or even death. Moreover, any such harm arises as a matter of physiological necessity, independently of the person’s nationality, social status, religion, etc. On our above definition, food thus qualifies as a basic need.⁸

Whether a need is basic depends not only on whether its non-fulfillment causes necessary and serious harm but also more specifically on one’s understanding of what is at stake.

Reflecting the work of Copp (1998, pp. 125–26) and a long tradition of understanding what constitutes human well-being (see, e.g., Feinberg, 1989, Chapter 18; Griffin, 1986, Chapter 11; Raz, 1986, Chapters 12 and 14, 1994, Chapter 1), it seems highly plausible to suggest that what is at stake is the value of autonomy (i.e., the value of being able to develop one's own conception of the good life and to pursue this conception). This assumption leads us to propose that a person needs something in a basic sense if and only if not having, being, or realizing this thing necessarily and seriously harms the person in the sense of impairing their autonomy (see also Section 3.4).

Food meets this more fine-grained definition of basic needs as well. If a person lacks food they will typically not be able to develop and rationally pursue their own conception of the good life. Too much of their attention will be focused on facts involving the lack of food (Keys et al., 1950). Other things that plausibly qualify as basic needs on our definition include drinkable water, healthcare, appropriate shelter, physical security, self-respect, and education. While we do not exclude the possibility that further items might be added or that items need to be removed, we prefer to interpret the above definition as entailing only a short list.⁹ Basic needs satisfaction on our view characterizes a minimally good rather than a fully good life.¹⁰

2.2. A Plausible Conception of Sufficiency

The second main claim of needs-based sufficientarianism concerns the principle of intergenerational justice. Basic needs as the currency of intergenerational justice are logically compatible with various understandings of this principle. The principle that we will defend here and which fits basic needs best is that of sufficiency. That is, we propose that both present and future persons should have “enough” (in terms of the satisfaction of their basic needs)—that their well-being should be above a certain threshold of sufficiency.

Sufficientarianism can take a number of different forms (see Benbaji, 2005, pp. 316–21, and 2006; Casal, 2007, pp. 312–26; Huseby, 2010). The version that will be discussed in this chapter is characterized by two theses, namely by what scholars have called the “positive thesis” (see especially Casal, 2007, pp. 298–99) and the “shift thesis” (Shields, 2016, pp. 34–35). The positive thesis captures sufficientarianism's main intuition, as introduced in the last paragraph. It states that we have weighty non-instrumental reasons to secure at least enough of some benefit(s). According to the shift thesis, “[o]nce people have secured enough there is a discontinuity in the rate of change of the marginal weight of our reasons to benefit individuals further” (Shields, 2017, p. 211). The shift thesis is compatible with three understandings of the relevance of justice-based reasons above the threshold. First, once a person is above the threshold of sufficiency, there is no justice-based reason to benefit this person (which would mean that needs-based sufficientarianism accounts for all valid intergenerational justice claims).¹¹ Second, and more plausibly, other justice-based reasons apply that are less weighty (which would mean that addition-

al justice claims can be valid). Third, the same justice-based reasons as below the threshold undergo a relative change of weight at the sufficiency threshold.¹²

Suppose there are justice-based reasons to benefit persons above the threshold of sufficiency too. Then how much priority should we give to benefiting those below the threshold? Elsewhere one of us has argued that in the intergenerational context weak sufficientarianism is more plausible than strong sufficientarianism (Meyer & Stelzer, 2018; but see Meyer & Roser, 2009). Weak sufficientarianism gives some, but not absolute, priority to those who are below the threshold. Both below and above the threshold it matters more to benefit persons (a) the worse off the persons, (b) the more persons are being benefited, (c) the larger the benefit at issue. Benefits differ in their quality in the sense that their realization or non-realization will have different consequences in terms of realizing a sufficient level of well-being. Benefits that enable basic needs satisfaction matter most (as they are necessary to move people up to the threshold). But other benefits can matter too. Weak sufficientarianism allows for trade-offs between enabling basic needs satisfaction and other ways of increasing well-being.¹³ Moreover, it also allows for trade-offs between persons above and below the threshold. For example, if we can either benefit one single person just below the threshold slightly or many persons just above the threshold to a large extent, then under certain circumstances our view may recommend going for the latter option.

In the sense in which we have so far discussed (weak) sufficientarianism, we have assumed circumstances of non-scarcity. In the real world this assumption may not hold. Suppose the resources of all currently living individuals who have more than what is necessary for them to be sufficiently well off were redistributed to the point where these individuals are just well off enough to meet the threshold. Then the present generation may still be unable to meet its intergenerational duties. But presently living persons do not seem to have a duty to ensure that future persons are sufficiently well off at the price of forgoing sufficient well-being for themselves. Rather, we need to weigh all people's claims. How ought we to go about doing this?¹⁴

Proponents of sufficientarianism have proposed different principles of distribution below the threshold of sufficiency. Most prominently, they have argued that we ought to maximize the well-being of present and future individuals below the threshold (*min-deprivation*; Wolf, 2009, pp. 356–57) or that we ought to maximize the number of individuals who are sufficiently well off (*headcount*; Page, 2007a, pp. 85–95). On our view both of these below-threshold principles are problematic. This is because they too easily imply that we ought to sacrifice the worst-off present or future persons for the sake of better-off, but still badly off, persons. For example, when resources are scarce and easing the pain of a terminally ill patient would require a great amount of resources, under most circumstances both the min-deprivation and the headcount principles will entail that one ought not to ease this patient's pain. After all, by spending the resources otherwise, well-being below the threshold can be increased to a higher extent (as requested by min-depriva-

tion) or more individuals can be made sufficiently well off (as requested by headcount). But this implication seems intuitively problematic.

In light of this problem, and as indicated above, we propose to understand sufficientarianism as involving a more plausible “below-threshold priority view.” According to this understanding, benefiting persons below the threshold of sufficiency matters more the more claimants are benefited and the greater these benefits (Meyer, 2009a, 2009b, 2015; Meyer & Roser, 2009). This understanding only entails sacrificing the worst-off individuals (like a terminally ill patient) for the sake of better-off, but still badly off, individuals under circumstances where the former higher-weight claims will be outweighed by the sum of the less weighty claims of a higher number of better-off people—and arguably these happen to be the circumstances under which doing so also seems intuitively plausible.

3. Basic Needs as the Currency of Intergenerational Justice

Having clarified needs-based sufficientarianism, let us now explain why we believe that it is well grounded. We will first defend basic needs as the currency of intergenerational justice.

Scholars have proposed various accounts of which benefits and burdens matter in assessing intergenerational distributions. In what follows we do not purport to demonstrate the superiority of basic needs vis-à-vis all of these alternatives. Rather, our focus will be on four particularly prominent competing currencies of intergenerational justice:¹⁵ (1) welfare (i.e., the satisfaction of preferences, whatever these preferences happen to be [e.g., Arrow, 1963; Goodin, 1995; Singer, 1979]),¹⁶ (2) impersonal resources (i.e., goods that can be used to produce many kinds of benefits, such as income and wealth [e.g., Barry, 1989; Rawls, 2001]), (3) capabilities in the sense of Amartya Sen (i.e., those freedoms to do or be certain things that persons value [Sen, 1992, 1999]),¹⁷ and (4) central capabilities in the sense of Martha Nussbaum (i.e., a particular set of freedoms to do or be certain things, pertaining to life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play, and control over one’s environment [Nussbaum, 2006]).¹⁸

3.1. Universality

One important feature that privileges some currencies of intergenerational justice over others is their temporal universality. Suppose that the things that exemplify a particular currency in the future (e.g., the things that enable the satisfaction of preferences or constitute freedoms to do or be certain things) are different from the things that exemplify this currency today. Under the assumption that this change does not follow (fully) predictable patterns, we cannot (fully) reliably assess how present actions will affect the currency’s future distribution. We would be stuck with (some) uncertainty or even agnos-

ticism about our intergenerational duties of justice—which is, other things being equal, an undesirable result.

Basic needs may not be as temporally universal as impersonal resources. However, they are more universal than welfare, capabilities, and central capabilities. It is possible and plausible that future persons will have (fundamentally) different preferences and will value different capabilities than persons living today. Even Nussbaum stresses that her list of central capabilities is open for revision and needs to be specified in relation to local contexts. Moreover, she acknowledges that the extent to which we should have these capabilities is up for political negotiations as well (1990, 2006; see also Petz, 2018).

The precise direction of future changes in preferences, valued capabilities, and central capabilities is difficult to predict. It depends on factors such as the technologies that will become available to future generations and the way in which they will structure their social lives. Basic needs, in contrast, are much less likely to change, and potential changes are easier to predict. Future people will still need food, drinkable water, healthcare, etc. (e.g., Brock, 2005, p. 63; Page, 2007c, p. 17). Based on the currency of basic needs, principles of intergenerational justice can therefore yield more certainty and knowledge about what we owe to future generations than when they are based on welfare, capabilities, or central capabilities.

Against the above argument it might be objected that needs-based sufficientarianism actually is concerned not with the distribution of basic needs but rather with the distribution of means to satisfy these needs. And at least these satisfiers seem to be highly temporally relative. For example, while future generations will still have a basic need for food, they may develop or discover wholly new ways of satisfying this need, such as eating insects or growing meat in laboratories. Such changes in basic needs satisfiers seem difficult to predict. Given our basic needs currency, the objection goes, principles of intergenerational justice hence cannot yield much certainty or knowledge about our intergenerational duties of justice after all.

We concede that basic needs satisfaction admits of significant temporal (as well as cultural) variation. However, basic needs still allow for more universal claims than welfare, capabilities, and central capabilities currencies. To begin with, just as future generations may satisfy their basic needs in novel ways, they may satisfy their preferences or realize their capabilities in novel ways too. The above problem hence afflicts these alternative accounts as well. Moreover, compared to the satisfaction of preferences and the realization of capabilities, changes in basic needs satisfaction follow more predictable patterns. On our definition, any such changes are constrained by presently highly invariable facts about humans' environment and their constitution. Such facts tend to change only gradually and slowly. For example, both learned disgust reactions and cultural traditions will prevent most people in Western societies from starting to eating insects any time soon; and whatever will satisfy the basic need for food in the future will still have to be such that it is nutritious for humans (Doyal & Gough, 1991, pp. 155–59).

3.2. Objectivity

A second feature that affects the appropriateness of currencies of intergenerational justice is their objectivity (by which we here mean metaphysical objectivity in the sense of mind-independence; see, e.g., Huemer, 2005, pp. 2–4; Pölzler, 2018, pp. 1–5).

It strikes us as uncontroversial that all or at least most basic needs are highly objective (Gough, 2015, p. 1201; Reader, 2007, pp. 51–52; Wiggins, 1998, p. 6). For example, both whether a person has a basic need for food and whether they are able to satisfy this basic need are independent from what anybody thinks about these issues. Even if we all believed or hoped or preferred that a person does not have a basic need for food, they would still have this basic need; and even if we all believed or hoped or preferred that a person is able to satisfy this basic need for food, they may still be unable to do so. In being objective, basic needs again contrast with welfare, capabilities, and central capabilities. What a person prefers and which capabilities they value obviously are contingent on mental states, namely on this person's preferences and valuations. And again, though more objective than welfare and capabilities, even Nussbaum allows for both the list and the threshold values of her central capabilities to be somewhat dependent on the valuations of local communities (which makes them less objective than basic needs).

Some scholars have argued that, far from being an advantage, objectivity is actually a disadvantage of currencies of justice. In particular, it has been objected that this feature prevents individuals from deciding for themselves what matters to them, and thus promotes paternalism, that is, disrespect for the person's autonomy (e.g., Alkire, 2002, p. 169; Sen, 1984, p. 514). But objectivity, in fact, does not necessitate a high amount of paternalism. There are many ways in which needs-based sufficientarianism accounts for persons' autonomy. First, needs-based sufficientarianism does not demand of states that they actually meet claimants' basic needs but only that they enable them to do so. This means that claimants are still free to be ascetics, illiterates, etc. Second, needs-based sufficientarianism also does not require that states directly provide claimants with the satisfiers of their basic needs. In many cases they will rather have a duty to create or maintain institutions which enable persons to meet these needs themselves, through their own work and efforts (e.g., Copp, 1998, pp. 113–14, 124). And third, on our understanding of basic needs, promoting persons' autonomy is even the final end of meeting their basic needs (see Section 2.1).

In our view, being objective is, all things considered, advantageous for currencies of intergenerational justice. There are two main reasons for thinking so. First, the distribution of objective benefits and burdens can be more easily and reliably assessed than the distribution of non-objective ones (Reader, 2007, p. 52).¹⁹ In investigating the extent to which persons are or will be able to meet their basic needs, for example, states can to a large extent rely on well-established social indicators such as life expectancy, health expenditure, or poverty rates. They do not need to engage in inherently less reliable studies of or political debates about persons' preferences, valuations, etc. (e.g., Costanza et al., 2007; Hicks & Streeten, 1979). There is also no need to draw doubtful inferences from market

behavior, as proponents of the welfare currency might suggest (for a critique of such inferences, see Sen, 1977).

Second, and even more importantly, objective currencies also shield principles of intergenerational justice against an intergenerational version of the so-called adaptive preference problem. Humans have an innate tendency to lower their preferences in circumstances in which these preferences likely will not be satisfied (Elster, 1983). In the face of problems such as massive climate change, future generations may therefore no longer prefer being unaffected by (aspects of) these problems. They may even no longer value corresponding capabilities or may interpret the content and thresholds of central capabilities in a somewhat less ambitious way. This means that on welfare accounts, (to a lesser extent) capability accounts, and (to an even lesser extent) central capability accounts, the fact that we currently create and worsen problems such as climate change may not constitute an injustice toward future generations.²⁰ By doing so we may fail to frustrate future persons' (adapted) preferences or prevent them from having (those adapted) capabilities that they value or that are central. More objective currencies such as basic needs avoid this implausible consequence. Even if future persons did not prefer what would satisfy their basic needs or did not value the capabilities associated with them or interpreted what counts as capability and the threshold values of capabilities differently, they would still have to be regarded as badly off as long as these needs are not satisfied (Gough, 2015, p. 1193; Page, 2007b, p. 455).

3.3. Non-Materialism

Another feature that seems to constitute a *pro tanto* reason for accepting any currency of intergenerational justice is its being non-materialistic. There are two plausible ways of understanding this criterion: (1) as requiring that currencies account for the imperfect conversion of material resources into well-being and (2) as requiring that currencies focus on well-being itself rather than on the material means of achieving well-being.

One convincing objection against impersonal resources as the currency of justice is that these resources are unreliable indicators of well-being (see Page, 2007b, pp. 457–58; Sen, 1992, pp. 19–21, 26–30). The fact that two persons have the same amount of income, for example, does not preclude that one of them is significantly worse off than the other through no fault of their own or cannot even have a minimally good life (which seems unfair). This is because persons naturally differ in the extent to and the way in which they can convert material resources into well-being. They are more or less healthy, more or less talented, and so on. Hence, the same amount of income can enable one person to live a very good life, while it is insufficient to secure even a minimally good life for another person.

Does the currency of basic needs involve such a failure to account for differences in conversion factors too? Some scholars have argued that this is indeed the case (see Sen, 2003, p. 47). However, this objection is unwarranted. Fulfilling persons' basic needs requires different kinds and quantities of satisfiers. For example, construction workers need

a higher intake of calories than philosophers (see Braybrooke, 1987). Once persons' basic needs are fulfilled, however—once no more food, drinkable water, etc., is needed—they are equally well off. Grounding duties of justice in basic needs hence does not lead to intuitively unfair outcomes where some persons, through no fault of their own, are significantly worse off than others or cannot even secure a minimally good life.

Relatedly, currencies of justice also should not be materialistic in the sense of confusing material means with (non-material) ends. Sen convincingly argued that, rather than constituting well-being, material resources are only means of achieving it. For example, income by itself is not part of what it is to be well off; it only happens to be something that can be used to increase well-being. Hence, Sen rightly accused impersonal resources accounts of “commodity fetishism”—of failing to focus on and measuring the important kind of thing. Some scholars have objected that basic needs accounts of the currency of justice are guilty of overemphasizing the material means of well-being too (e.g., Sen, 1984, p. 513). But on the basis of our definition of basic needs, this second materialism objection fails as well.

First, while the objects of most basic needs are material goods, humans can plausibly be attributed basic needs for some non-material goods as well. It is plausible, for example, that not having enough self-respect and education necessarily and seriously harms persons—which means that self-respect and education are basic needs (for other putative basic needs that are non-material, see, e.g., Braybrooke, 1987, p. 36; Copp, 1998, p. 126; Doyal & Gough, 1991, p. 158). Second, and even more importantly, on our definition of basic needs the ultimate end of the satisfaction of any basic need is to enable persons to realize the values of autonomy and rational agency. This conception of well-being is decidedly non-materialistic. Meeting basic needs only matters because it is necessary for obtaining the non-material good of autonomy.

3.4. Threshold Specification

According to sufficientarianism, people's well-being ought to be above a certain threshold of sufficiency. One of the main objections against sufficientarianism is that it is unable to provide a plausible substantive specification of this threshold. In particular, any such specification has been claimed to be (1) arbitrary and/or (2) unable to account for the threshold's moral significance. The strength of this objection strongly depends on the currency of justice that sufficientarianism is combined with. Given sufficientarianism as the principle of intergenerational justice, the appropriateness of currencies is therefore also a function of the extent to which they allow for a plausible substantive specification of the threshold of sufficiency. In our view, basic needs fare better with regard to this criterion than welfare, impersonal resources, capabilities, and central capabilities.

According to the arbitrariness version of the objection, sufficientarianism's inability to provide a plausible substantive specification of its threshold of sufficiency is due to the fact that any such specification is bound to be arbitrary (Casal, 2007, pp. 312–14; Rawls, 1999, pp. 278–79). With regard to welfare, impersonal resources, and capabilities, this

charge is warranted. For example, it seems arbitrary that having 30% of one's preferences satisfied, earning \$2 a day, or having 20 valued capabilities is enough (in terms of justice), while having 29% of one's preferences satisfied, earning \$1.99 a day, or having 19 valued capabilities is not. The concept of basic needs, in contrast, essentially entails the idea of a qualitative, and hence non-arbitrary, difference. Being able to fulfill such needs takes precedence over being able to fulfill non-basic needs and desires. Moreover, it distinguishes a life that has a certain minimum quality from a life that lacks this quality (e.g., Benbaji, 2005, pp. 324–26; Copp, 1998, p. 122; Miller, 2007a, pp. 3–4, and 2007b, p. 181).

According to a second version of the objection, sufficientarians are unable to provide a plausible substantive specification of their threshold of sufficiency because no such specification can account for the moral significance ascribed to this threshold (Arneson, 2005, pp. 26–32). On some currencies of justice, this objection is again warranted. Why, for example, should it primarily matter to have 30% of one's preferences satisfied, earn more than \$2 a day, or have 20 capabilities? Basic needs, in contrast, are intrinsically morally demanding. That a person needs something in a basic sense by itself entails that the person ought to be able to have, be, or realize this thing. Moreover, it entails that the person's having, being, or realizing this thing matters generally more than having anybody's preferences fulfilled, providing anybody with impersonal resources or promoting anybody's capabilities (Reader & Brock, 2004, pp. 252–53; Thomson, 2005, p. 175).

Proponents of welfare, impersonal resources, and capability currencies may object that on closer consideration these currencies enable a non-arbitrary and significance-accounting specification of sufficientarianism's threshold after all. Having 30% of one's preferences satisfied, earning \$2 a day, or having 20 valued capabilities is distinctly important because it enables people to have, be, or do certain things. But what things? We believe that the most natural answer to this question—and the answer that ultimately motivates most of these alternative specifications of the threshold—refers to basic needs. The reason having 30% of one's preferences satisfied, earning \$2 a day, or having 20 valued capabilities sets the threshold for a minimally good life is that it enables people to meet their basic needs.

Our claim that basic needs offer an appropriate specification of the sufficientarian threshold might be challenged in two main ways. First, critics might object that basic needs only do better than alternative currencies for conceptual reasons. For example, might we not just as well specify the sufficientarian threshold in terms of basic (or central) *capabilities*, as Nussbaum suggests? Or in terms of basic *preferences* (Bykvist, 2016)? However, this objection ignores the fact that any of these alternative threshold concepts are theoretical constructs, with researchers themselves stipulating what counts and does not count as basic. The concept of basic needs, in contrast, is a “natural” compound and, as such, part of everyday language (at least in many languages, including English).²¹ In these languages, *basic needs* therefore provides a less arbitrary specification of the suffi-

sufficientarian threshold and explains the significance of this threshold better than notions such as basic preferences or basic (or central) capabilities.²²

A second objection against needs-based specifications of the sufficientarian threshold focuses on our preferred explanation for the importance of these needs. We have defined basic needs as those things that are required for persons to avoid being necessarily and seriously harmed in the sense of impairments of their autonomy. Autonomy can be understood to be a scalar concept. That is, not only can people be more or less autonomous, but the more autonomous they are, the better for them, other things being equal. But if there are no qualitative (non-scalar) differences between different levels of autonomy, then how can one particular such level—the level that is guaranteed by the satisfaction of basic needs—provide a non-arbitrary and importance-explaining foundation for sufficientarian understandings of the principle of justice?

Our response to this challenge is based on the idea that we can identify at least one qualitative level of autonomy, the reaching of which is of greatest moral importance and should be prioritized in accounts of distributive justice. We are referring to the notion of persons being autonomous in such a way that they can make decisions about what is worth doing and how to pursue the ends they consider important. Only if people achieve this threshold of autonomy will they be able to take part in what can be considered a minimally good life. Arguably, realizing conditions of justice is pointless unless doing so contributes to people being able to pursue a minimally good life. If so, achieving that threshold level of autonomy for all is most urgent.²³ Reaching this threshold of well-being is closely related to having one's basic needs fulfilled, or, as Copp puts it, "meeting one's basic needs is central to achieving the good from one's own standpoint" (1993, p. 114; see also pp. 123–25 and Copp, 1992, p. 254). When people constantly need to focus on having their basic needs fulfilled, they will not be sufficiently autonomous. Currently living people should hence primarily aim at securing conditions that are likely to allow future people to meet their basic needs so that they can choose among valuable options and make decisions as to how to pursue them.

Suppose that the autonomy level that is guaranteed by the satisfaction of basic needs provides us with a foundation for a sufficientarian understanding of what justice requires that is non-arbitrary and explains the primary significance of reaching that level in terms of enabling people to have a minimally good life. It is noteworthy that this is compatible with autonomy being a scalar concept. All else equal, more autonomy above the threshold might well have positive value. We have non-satiable, but possibly diminishing, reasons to promote the scalar aspects of the good of autonomy. The idea of "sufficient autonomy" (Shields, 2016, Chapters 3 and 4) relies on there being a plausible shift in the value of autonomy in terms of the weight and the type of reasons we have to promote autonomy up to the threshold. Up to the threshold, promoting autonomy is a matter of enabling people to have a minimally good life. Promoting autonomy above the threshold will often concern enabling people to realize particular conceptions of the good life.²⁴

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To sum up, if one considers the criteria of universality, objectivity, non-materialism, and threshold specification, basic needs turn out to be a more appropriate currency of intergenerational justice than their competitors. While the differences to welfare as a currency are stark according to all criteria, basic needs clearly differ from impersonal resources when it comes to non-materialism. Arguably, capabilities in Sen's understanding do less well in terms of universality and objectivity, and central capabilities in Nussbaum's understanding might do so too. Compared to all the competitors considered, including central capabilities, basic needs also arguably enable a non-arbitrary and significance-accounting specification of sufficientarianism's threshold, namely as a matter of the ordinary use of the concept (see Table 1).

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Table 1 Comparison of Main Currencies of Intergenerational Justice

	Basic needs	Central capabilities (Nussbaum)	Impersonal resources	Capabilities (Sen)	Welfare
Universality	Arguably fully + +++	Arguably to a high degree ++ +	Fully +++++	Arguably not + +	Clearly not
Objectivity	Arguably fully + +++	Arguably to a high degree ++ +	Fully +++++	Not	Clearly not
Non-materialism	Fully +++++	Fully +++++	Not	Fully +++++	Depends
Threshold specification	Fully +++++	Arguably	Arguably, not by itself	Not	Arguably, not by itself

Note. These characterizations reflect the interpretations of these currencies as developed in the chapter; we have not argued for an understanding of the relative weight of the criteria or their comparability.

4. Sufficiency as the Principle of Intergenerational Justice

In the last section we defended needs-based sufficientarianism's currency. Now we will turn to its principle of intergenerational justice, that is, to the principle of sufficiency.

Scholars have proposed various understandings of the principle of intergenerational justice. Analogously to the case of basic needs, we do not purport to show that sufficientarianism is superior to all of them. Our focus will rather be on three particularly prominent alternative understandings: (1) *egalitarianism* (the understanding that future persons should be as well off as currently living persons [see, e.g., Barry, 1999]),²⁵ (2) *prioritarianism* (the understanding that benefiting present and future persons matters more the worse off these persons are, the more of them who are benefited, and the greater the benefits [Attas, 2009, pp. 207–11; Holtug, 2006; Parfit, 1997, p. 213]), and (3) *utilitarianism* (the understanding that persons' well-being ought to be maximized across generations [see, e.g., Mulgan, 2006; Roemer & Suzumura, 2007]).

4.1. Leveling Down

Egalitarians claim that currently living and future persons' well-being should be on a par. This understanding does not only imply that it is worse for future generations to be worse off than the present generation; it also implies that it is, in one respect, worse for future generations to be better off. In the intragenerational context, some philosophers have argued that this implication (the recommendation to "level down" persons' well-being) is implausible (see Parfit, 1997, pp. 213–21; Raz, 1986, pp. 230–35). An analogous objection applies to intergenerational relations as well. How could a more equal distribution across generations be better if it came at the cost of some generations being worse off and none being better off?

Given this problem, any understanding of the principle of intergenerational justice that does not recommend leveling down is at a relative advantage vis-à-vis egalitarianism. Sufficientarianism—just like prioritarianism and utilitarianism—is among these theories. At least according to versions that do not endorse egalitarianism above the threshold, potential differences between the present and future generations' well-being turn out to be irrelevant. What matters most from a sufficientarian perspective is that the well-being of each present and future person is above the threshold of sufficiency (irrespective of how well off any other person is).

Critics might object that while sufficientarianism does not entail leveling down, it also might not entail leveling up; that is, it might not entail that it is better for future generations to be better off. This seems to be the case whenever the well-being of the present generation is at or above the threshold of sufficiency, for if justice is all about getting people up to the threshold, it then just does not matter whether future generations are better

off. However, sufficientarianism in the sense discussed here actually does not have this implausible implication. As explained in Section 2.2, sufficientarianism allows for there being reasons of justice to benefit those who are above the threshold of sufficiency too (according to one plausible interpretation of the shift thesis). So even if the present generation is sufficiently well off, it can still be better for future generations to be better off.

4.2. Overdemandingness

Prioritarianism and (even more so) utilitarianism are notorious for entailing excessive intergenerational requirements.²⁶ Present actions or inactions can improve the well-being of many future generations to at least some extent. Moreover, the number of future generations will likely be very large. Hence, according to these theories, we ought to sacrifice more of our present well-being for the sake of future generations than seems plausible. It might even be the case that we are required to incur significant costs for the sake of only miniscule future benefits (as in this way we might maximize the weighted sum of benefits for future persons, or we might maximize overall well-being) (see Rawls, 1999, p. 287; Wolf, 2009, p. 373).

In a more contingent sense, egalitarianism tends to be overdemanding as well. Even though some currently living persons are very badly off, many are well off, and some are extremely well off. So suppose egalitarians are right that intergenerational justice requires making future generations equally well off as the present generation in total. Then, given the wide-ranging effects of present actions and the high number of future generations, meeting these requirements again comes with excessive costs for those who live today.

What, then, about sufficientarianism? Combined with some currencies of intergenerational justice, sufficientarianism might turn out to be overdemanding as well. Future persons may have very expensive preferences. They may value capabilities whose provision requires a large number of resources. And even only ensuring central capabilities (assuming that their fulfillment requires far more than securing basic needs) may turn out to be overly costly if the well-being of a high number of people is at stake (see Watene, 2013). Needs-based sufficientarianism, however, does not seem to imply overdemandingness. Arguably, providing even a large number of future persons with the satisfiers to their needs for water, food, shelter, clothing, and education does not put heavy burdens on the shoulders of those who live today. As Wolf notes in his discussion of intergenerational climate justice, “we have more than enough stuff to meet the basic needs of everyone, and needs provision is shockingly inexpensive” (2009, p. 362).²⁷ Moreover, imposing these burdens on currently living people seems justified as fulfilling basic needs is a prerequisite for a minimally good life.

Critics of sufficientarianism might disagree and consider needs-based sufficientarianism overdemanding in the following sense: Under certain circumstances, at least some currently living individuals are required to make significant sacrifices, namely those who are better off (i.e., who are above the threshold of sufficiency). Sufficientarianism seems to

entail that if a state can spend a certain amount of resources either to increase the well-being of many currently living individuals to a large extent or to raise the well-being of only one future individual to the threshold of sufficiency, it ought to choose Option 1 (Casal, 2007, p. 298; Widerquist, 2010).

However, this problem mainly afflicts strong versions of sufficientarianism. Only strong sufficientarianism entails that persons below the threshold should always be benefited prior to persons above the threshold, regardless of the size of the benefits and the number of beneficiaries. Weak sufficientarianism—the version that is argued for in this chapter—does allow for across-threshold trade-offs (as explained in Section 2.2). So if a state can spend a certain amount of resources either to increase the well-being of many currently living individuals to a large extent or to raise the well-being of only one future individual to the threshold of sufficiency, then this understanding may favor the first of these options after all.

Actually, some versions of weak sufficientarianism require weighing up the claims of people below and above the threshold as a matter of distributive justice. This is true for those versions of weak sufficientarianism that attribute distributive justice claims to people above the sufficientarian threshold (though weaker ones than those who have not reached the threshold).

4.3. Population Cap

Another challenging issue for understandings of the principle of intergenerational justice is the optimal size of future populations. Arguably, sufficientarianism entails a plausible cap: The number of people brought into existence ought to be compatible with all people having sufficiently good lives, that is, with all people being able to satisfy their basic needs (see Meyer, 1997, pp. 139–40). We consider this cap intuitively plausible.

In contrast, the population caps entailed by (some versions of) egalitarianism, utilitarianism, and prioritarianism seem much less plausible. These alternative theories of the principle of intergenerational justice allow for or require a very large number of future people, some or many or all of whom are badly off in the sense that their well-being is below the sufficientarian threshold. After all, having large but badly off future generations might not conflict with future generations being equally well off than the present generation in total; it might maximize well-being (provided that future persons' lives are at least worth living); and it might also be consistent with prioritizing the number of beneficiaries, the size of benefits, and those who are worse off.

A natural objection against this argument is that the sufficientarian population cap is only plausible from a sufficientarian theoretical perspective. As an egalitarian, a utilitarian, or a prioritarian, one would favor alternative caps, namely as implications of one's guiding principle. There is indeed some truth to this charge of circularity. Yet, in assessing principles of justice, we should not only engage in theoretical considerations on the level of these principles; we should also give some weight to considered judgments about cases, striving to make our principles coherent with these judgments (so as to achieve a state of

“reflective equilibrium” [e.g., Daniels, 1979, 1980; Rawls, 1999]. If it could be shown that not only the authors of this article but suitably situated competent moral judges (Rawls, 1951, pp. 179–81) would prefer the sufficientarian population cap, then this fact would provide a (coherentist) reason for accepting sufficientarianism.

4.4. Moral Metaphysics

Metaethicists distinguish two kinds of theories of moral metaphysics: objectivist and subjectivist ones. The appropriateness of these theories is a matter of ongoing philosophical debate (see, e.g., Brink, 1989; Harman, 1996; Mackie, 1977/2011). A final important advantage of sufficientarianism is that, if combined with basic needs as the currency of intergenerational justice, it fully sidesteps this debate. This is because needs-based sufficientarianism is compatible not only with both plausible objectivist theories (as are many other theories of intergenerational justice) but also with plausible subjectivist theories.

That needs-based sufficientarianism sits well with moral objectivism should not come as a surprise. We have learned that, in contrast to welfare and capabilities, basic needs are highly objective. Needs-based sufficientarianism can thus be objectively grounded by arguing that (some) facts about what is intergenerationally just are identical to objective facts about whether present and future persons are able to meet their basic needs. Such naturalistic objectivist theories (see, e.g., Brink, 1989; Railton, 1986) are appealing for many reasons. For example, they are compatible with a global naturalistic outlook and straightforwardly vindicate widely held ideas about morality, such as that there is only one correct answer to moral questions or that there can be moral progress.

Subjectivist theories in political philosophy have mostly taken the form of contractualism, which appeals to a hypothetical social contract. The most important contemporary model of this kind was proposed by Rawls (1999). Rawls argues that principles of justice are justified if the parties of the contract choose them from behind a “veil of ignorance,” that is, in the absence of knowledge about personal characteristics such as their gender, ethnicity, social position, and conception of the good.²⁸ On Rawls’ view this thought experiment supports three principles of justice: (1) the principle of greatest equal liberty, (2) the difference principle, and (3) the principle of equal opportunity. In fact, however, there is reason to believe that in both intra- and intergenerational contexts the parties of the contract would rather choose and even grant lexical priority to needs-based sufficientarianism.

On Rawls’ characterization, the parties of his social contract are risk-averse. As not being able to satisfy one’s basic needs is the greatest possible harm, the parties will accordingly choose a principle that guarantees them the satisfaction of their basic needs. At first sight Rawls’ difference principle may seem to fulfill this criterion. However, the difference principle assumes the currency of impersonal resources; and even if all inequalities in a society lead to the least well off gaining in impersonal resources, this by no means guarantees that all members will be able to satisfy their basic needs. A person who depends on highly expensive cancer treatment, for example, may not be able to satisfy their

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basic need for health even if they are not among the least well off in terms of income and wealth. To ensure basic needs satisfaction both within and across generations, it thus seems plausible that the parties of Rawls' contract would choose needs-based sufficientarianism as a lexically prior principle of justice (e.g., Brock, 2004, pp. 171–80, and 2005, pp. 51–58; Copp, 1998, pp. 115–16; Wolf, 2009, pp. 354–55).²⁹

In fact, Rawls himself at one point acknowledges that people may decide in this way (1999, p. 7; for discussion, see Wolf, 2009),³⁰ and with regard to intragenerational relations there is even some empirical evidence for this claim (Frohlich & Oppenheimer, 1992).

Summing up, then, we find that with regard to the aspects that we have considered (leveling down, overdemandingness, repugnant conclusion, population cap, and moral metaphysics), sufficientarianism overall fares better than its main competitors. While the differences from egalitarianism as a currency are stark according to all criteria, sufficientarianism clearly differs from prioritarianism and utilitarianism when it comes to overdemandingness and its metaphysical justifications (see Table 2).

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Table 2 Comparison of Prominent Principles of Intergenerational Justice

	Sufficientarianism	Priority view	Egalitarianism	Utilitarianism
Leveling down	Weak and only below the threshold + +++	Weak +++	Strong	No +++++
Overdemandingness	Weak +++++	Stronger ++	Strong (given current level of well-being) +++	Strongest
Population cap	Intuitive +++++	Less intuitive +++ +	Less intuitive +++ +	Less intuitive +++ +
Moral metaphysics	Plausible objectivist and subjectivist justification +++++	Plausible objectivist, less plausible subjectivist justification +++++	Plausible objectivist, less plausible subjectivist justification +++++	Plausible objectivist, less plausible subjectivist justification +++++

Note. These characterizations reflect the interpretations of these principles as developed in the chapter; we have not argued for an understanding of the relative weight of the criteria or their comparability.

5. Conclusion

What do we owe future generations as a matter of justice? One answer to this question that has so far not been sufficiently explored is needs-based sufficientarianism: the theory that the present generation ought to enable future generations to meet their basic needs. In this chapter we explained and defended this theory of intergenerational justice in a programmatic way.

After having introduced what we regard as the most plausible variant of needs-based sufficientarianism, we argued that this variant is superior to several alternative ways of thinking about intergenerational justice. In so doing, we investigated both the claim that the ability to meet one's basic needs is an appropriate currency of intergenerational justice and the claim that sufficiency is an appropriate principle of intergenerational justice. It turned out that both of these claims are independently plausible. Moreover, they also mutually support each other in a number of ways, thus forming the basis of a particularly plausible and coherent theory of intergenerational justice.

Of course, we are aware that our arguments for needs-based sufficientarianism are not fully comprehensive or fully conclusive. For example, we have not compared our preferred currency and principle to all (versions of) other plausible competitors, and we have not been able to respond to all potential objections against our arguments. But our chapter hopefully suffices to at least motivate further (more detailed) research on this theory. In our view, there are good initial reasons to believe that intergenerational justice indeed first and foremost requires enabling future persons (as well as presently living persons) to meet their basic needs.

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Notes:

(1) In this chapter we assume that it is possible in principle that the present generation has duties of justice to future generations and do not consider objections against this assumption, such as the well-known “non-identity problem” (Parfit, 1986, pp. 351–80). For a defense of this assumption, see Meyer (2015, Sections 2 and 3).

(2) All of these authors have also suggested combining sufficientarianism with basic needs as the currency of intergenerational justice. However, they typically have not argued for this additional currency claim in much detail. Two notable exceptions are Wolf (2009) and Shue (1980). Shue explicates basic rights, among them subsistence rights, in terms of the fulfillment of “social guarantees against actual and threatened deprivations of at least some basic needs” (1980, p. 18; see also pp. 22–29). Shue (1993) argues for a basic, inalienable emissions allowance for populations of poorer regions, a notion on which Baatz (2014) as well as Baatz and Voget-Kleschin (2019) expand by arguing that a duty for emission reductions can be limited.

(3) Or, to be more precise, which entities are legitimate claimants of a fair distribution? Realizing a more just distribution will often require redistribution of benefits and burdens.

(4) However, one would want to qualify this assumption. For example, the obligations of states and those of individuals are closely related, at least in democratic states (see, e.g., Meyer, 2005, pp. 228–49). Also, states so far have not been successful in assuring that the burdens of climate change action are distributed effectively and fairly (see, e.g., Walliman-Helmer et al., 2016).

(5) In some sense, this idea can be traced back much further, at least to Epicurus. His distinction between necessary and unnecessary natural desires is close to the above distinction between instrumental and absolute needs (see Epicurus, 1926, p. 87).

(6) Most importantly, according to Wiggins, it is not a necessary condition for basic needs that the harm which arises from the non-fulfillment of such needs is serious. There can be basic needs whose non-fulfillment fails to be serious (1998, p. 16).

(7) In determining actual basic needs much depends on how this necessity condition is formulated and understood. For example, on our above formulation facts about persons' environment and constitution must only be such that, in the absence of the needed thing, they presently highly invariably lead to harm. This plausibly allows for considerable changes in environmental or constitutional facts to bring about changes in basic needs. Under the new circumstances, humans may no longer need things that they needed before, or they may need things that they did not need before.

(8) To be precise, what qualifies as a basic need is a certain amount of food over a certain period of time. Here, we will abstract from this question the "minimum standard of provision" of basic needs (see Braybrooke, 1987, pp. 38–46).

(9) To re-emphasize, these items are supposed to represent educated guesses. To determine the status of *X* as a basic need would ultimately require detailed empirical investigations into the consequences of being deprived of *X*, in particular into whether this deprivation necessarily and seriously harms persons by impairing their autonomy.

(10) Our definition can also be formulated in an alternative way (as suggested by Copp [1998] and Doyal & Gough [1991]). One could say that only autonomy and rational agency are basic needs, whereas things such as food, drinkable water, and healthcare are means of satisfying these needs. In this chapter we will stick to our above—more orthodox and intuitive—terminology. But even on our terminology the distinction between basic needs and their means of satisfaction matters. Strictly speaking, our preferred currency of intergenerational justice is not basic needs themselves but rather these means of their satisfaction. Needs-based sufficientarianism claims that any present or future person ought to have enough of these means. For example, any person ought to have enough grains, vegetables, meat, etc., to satisfy their basic need for food.

(11) This claim is often referred to as the “negative thesis” of sufficientarianism (Casal, 2007, pp. 299–304) and has been much criticized. The negative thesis amounts to a shift from “some set of distributive reasons to no distributive reasons” (Shields, 2017, p. 211).

(12) In Section 3.4 we suggest that this is the case for autonomy where, on the one hand, being more autonomous is better for people, other things being equal, but, on the other hand, reaching one particular level of autonomy is owed to people as a matter of justice, namely as a prerequisite for being able to have a minimally good life. Note also that the second and third of the above understandings of the relevance of justice-based reasons above the threshold are compatible and both individually and jointly compatible with the shift thesis.

(13) Arguably, in the actual world such situations will be rather rare. Under most circumstances the needs-related benefits will outweigh the benefits that lack such a relation.

(14) Whether the non-scarcity assumption holds is controversial. Some discussants of the basic needs currency have recently suggested that the present generation is sufficiently wealthy to enable future needs satisfaction without threatening its own ability to meet its basic needs (see Section 4.2). If this is correct—if the non-scarcity assumption holds—then sufficientarianism’s below-threshold pattern simply does not apply under current circumstances.

(15) Except for basic needs, Page (2007b) addresses the same currencies.

(16) Welfare has been defined in terms other than the satisfaction of preferences as well, for example, in terms of realizing items on “objective lists” of well-being-constituting things (e.g., love, friendship, or knowledge). However, given that our main targets in discussing this currency are economists and economists have widely equated welfare with preference satisfaction, we will nevertheless use the former (*welfare*) as a shorthand for the latter (*preference satisfaction*).

(17) Sen has been notoriously vague about which capabilities he takes to matter: (1) capabilities that persons actually value or (2) capabilities that they have reason to value (e.g., 2002, p. 585). On the second interpretation, capabilities would again avoid some of the below problems, while being closer to our view. In our understanding, however, the first interpretation fits better with other elements of Sen’s theory and is also (if only implicitly) dominant in the secondary literature. We will thus discuss the capability currency in the sense of capabilities that persons actually value. Note also that we will not discuss Sen’s (1992) idea of “basic capabilities” as it is very similar to what Nussbaum calls “central capabilities.”

(18) Neither Sen nor Nussbaum has provided a clear account of capabilities or central capabilities in the specific context of intergenerational justice. Here, we therefore interpret them in the sense that they would want to preserve the major features of these currencies as they have been developed in the intragenerational realm (similar, e.g., to Gutwald et al. [2014] and Watene [2013]; see also Sen [2013]). One way for both Sen and Nuss-

baum to escape some of our criticisms would be to argue that due to the distinctness of intergenerational relations, some of the things that they claimed in the intragenerational context actually do not apply here.

(19) One may object that, compared to some other currencies, basic needs satisfaction is at least difficult to assess in that these needs do not admit of a single metric (i.e., there are several basic needs and no given weightings between them). Our above definition of basic needs does suggest such a metric, however. The non-satisfaction of different basic needs matters to the extent that it impairs persons' autonomous agency.

(20) Sen's capability approach has been explicitly designed to avoid the problem of adaptive preferences. It indeed does so if one assumes an interpretation of capabilities as those capabilities that persons have reason to value (see Footnote 17). In this case, even if their unfavorable circumstances lead future people to stop valuing some capabilities (to some extent), they might still have reason to value them, and hence we would still have a duty of intergenerational justice to guarantee these capabilities. Yet, as pointed out, Sen can and has also been interpreted as focusing on capabilities that persons actually value. On this interpretation capability theories of the currency of justice are as vulnerable to the adaptive preference objection as welfare theories.

(21) There might be some languages in which the concept of basic needs is less familiar to ordinary speakers. In Japanese, for instance, two translations present themselves: 人間が生活していくのに必要とする基礎 ("the basis humans need for having a life") and 衣食住 ("clothing, food, sheltering"). Yet, it is not clear whether the concept expressed by any of these everyday terms is sufficiently close to what is expressed by the English term *basic needs*. Japanese philosophers therefore sometimes resort to this English term in discussing matters surrounding the minimally good life.

(22) Of course, and as commentators pointed out to us, given the philosophical and seemingly quasi-technical explication of basic needs as developed in this chapter, it might seem doubtful that we can claim that this explication reflects common use of the concept. This is indeed a legitimate worry that one of us will soon address in independent research (on folk intuitions about the concept of basic needs). In addition, we would like to point out that any philosophical specification of concepts must go beyond just capturing ordinary conceptions, and hence be narrower and in some sense revisionary, because a higher degree of precision and coherence with other concepts is required.

(23) Nielsen (2016) discusses several versions of "autonomy-catering sufficientarianism" (see also Axelsen & Nielsen, 2015; Huseby, 2017; Shields, 2017, pp. 218–20).

(24) One such conception aims at realizing autonomy to the fullest extent possible. Even if we think that the reasons for autonomy are principally satiable, it does not seem plausible to define the sufficientarian threshold in terms of that level. The highest possible level reflects a perfectionist ideal of well-being. Not only will most people not be able to reach that level, but it is questionable whether people have general moral reasons to aim at re-

alizing autonomy to the fullest degree possible and whether they can be thought to stand under general duties to support others in achieving it. Moreover, the epistemic conditions under which we relate to future non-contemporaries limit how we can identify means of promoting their well-being, including their autonomy. However, promoting the autonomy of persons above the threshold is challenging even when we know them as individuals and can exchange with them. On this, see in particular Raz (1994).

(25) In addition, or alternatively, one might hold that the standing of people relative to their contemporaries is important (Sher, 1979, p. 389). If this were our primary concern with intergenerational justice and if realizing such equality were understood to be intrinsically important, then any level of well-being would be considered justified as long as all future people fare equally badly. This is highly implausible. For a discussion of the intrinsic and extrinsic values of equality, see Holtug and Lippert-Rasmussen (2006) and Meyer and Roser (2009, pp. 236–43) and Scanlon (2018).

(26) For the ongoing debate on how to understand demandingness objections, see Van Ackeren and Derpmann (2019). Here, we assume that what is considered overdemanding for people is an action that people in principle can carry out. It has been argued that any understanding of overdemandingness is relative to or an element of a specific normative theory. If so, then we would have to rely on a coherentist justification for our claim that certain interpretations of intergenerational sufficientarianism are not overdemanding. See also Section 4.3.

(27) See Footnote 14 and accompanying text.

(28) Rawls calls this hypothetical choice situation the “original position.” Besides the veil of ignorance, the original position is characterized by several other features as well. The parties are supposed to be rational and mutually disinterested and to have a capacity for reasonableness and a sense of justice. Risk aversion, as discussed later in this section, is supposed to be an implication of the parties’ rationality (e.g., Rawls, 1999, pp. 111–12, 123–30, 144–53).

(29) Wolf (2009, pp. 354–55) proposed this argument in the specific intergenerational context that we are interested in (while Copp’s focus is on domestic justice and Brock’s on global justice).

(30) In particular, Rawls acknowledged that his two principles of justice might have to be complemented by a lexically prior needs-based principle:

the first principle covering the equal basic rights and liberties may easily be preceded by a lexically prior principle requiring that citizens’ basic needs be met, at least insofar as their being met is necessary for citizens to understand and to be able fruitfully to exercise [their] rights and liberties. Certainly any such principle must be assumed in applying the first principle. (1993, p. 7)

Basic Needs and Sufficiency: The Foundations of Intergenerational Justice

Lukas H. Meyer

Institute of Philosophy, University of Graz, Austria

Thomas Pölzler

Institute of Philosophy, University of Graz, Austria