

PHD THESIS SUMMARY:
Thresholds and Limits in Theories of Distributive Justice

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Many theories of distributive justice deploy thresholds. It is widely believed, for example, that societies have distinct and important duties towards people who do not have enough to meet some minimal standard of living. In contemporary philosophy, this view is called *sufficientarianism* and was coined by Harry Frankfurt (1987). But thresholds can also indicate that people have too much. Ingrid Robeyns (2017), for example, argues for *limitarianism*, which is the view that people have too much if they have more wealth than is necessary to live a fully flourishing life. Though not all views in distributive justice can plausibly be characterised as versions of sufficientarianism or limitarianism, many draw on similar thresholds in specifying what justice requires in society's distribution of benefits and burdens.

In this thesis, I propose an account of the concept and role of thresholds in distributive justice, which is currently lacking in the philosophical literature. I examine what sets threshold views apart from non-threshold views, what exactly qualifies a view as a threshold view, and how threshold views differ from each other. In doing so, I hope to clarify where the conflict between rival distributive views really lies, to shed light on some ongoing misunderstandings about thresholds, and to strengthen the prospects for threshold views in distributive justice.

Following an introduction and overview, in Chapter 2 I propose an account of thresholds in distributive justice (published as Timmer 2021b). I argue that thresholds consist of three elements. First, the *level* of the threshold determines when people have enough or too much. Second, the *moral value* of the threshold determines if it is intrinsically valuable for people to reach that threshold or if reaching it is instrumentally valuable. Third, the *allocative principles* determine the distribution of valuable goods among people above and below the threshold. Among other things, I argue that this account shows that sufficientarians should attach distinct value to maximizing the number of people above the threshold,

which goes against a received wisdom in the literature that such ‘head-counting’ should be rejected (cf. Shields 2012, 103).

In Chapter 3, I propose a novel characterization of sufficientarianism (published as Timmer, forthcoming). I argue that sufficientarianism is best characterised as combining a ‘continuum claim’, a ‘priority claim’, and a ‘deficiency claim’. The *priority claim* says that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits in certain ranges over benefits in other ranges (e.g., a range indicating ‘enough’ and a range indicating ‘not enough’). The *continuum claim* says that at least two of those ranges are on one continuum. And the *deficiency claim* says that the lower a range is on a continuum, the more priority it has. Together, these claims say that we have non-instrumental reasons to prioritize benefits below some threshold over benefits above that threshold. I argue that this characterization of sufficientarianism reveals overlooked similarities between sufficientarianism and other views in distributive justice and that it can help strengthen sufficientarianism against common objections, such as the objection that its threshold is arbitrary or has too much normative weight.

Chapters 4–6 focus on limitarianism. In Chapter 4, I defend two versions of limitarianism in distributive justice (published as Timmer 2021a). First, I defend limitarian mid-level principles, which are distributive principles that draw on wealth limits to guide institutional design and individual actions, and which can be endorsed by proponents of different distributive views. For example, both proponents of the idea that justice is ultimately concerned with equality and those who believe justice is concerned with sufficiency can accept that wealth limits promote justice (e.g., by promoting equality or sufficiency), even though they disagree about what justice ultimately requires. Second, I defend presumptive limitarianism, which draws on wealth limits to specify what a just allocation of wealth requires in the absence of substantive grounds to favour specific distributions. Suppose, for example, that wealth should be distributed on the basis of how many hours people work. Substantive principles will then tell us how to distribute wealth if Jane works ten hours and John works two hours. But presumptions tell us how to distribute that wealth if it is *not* known how many hours people work. I argue that in cases where such presumptive principles are required because there is not enough information to apply substantive principles of distributive justice, justice requires limiting how much wealth people can have.

In Chapter 5, I argue that the prospects for limitarianism depend on both its political feasibility and its likelihood of promoting the relevant

values, such as meeting urgent needs or securing political equality. Limitarians must show that wealth limits are politically feasible and are likely to promote those values. This does, however, raise a challenge because concerns for feasibility and promoting these values might lead to conflicts. For example, higher thresholds may be more feasible whereas lower thresholds may be more effective. I discuss how limitarianism can deal with those conflicts in this chapter, such as by making their wealth limit more directly responsive to concerns for efficiency, or by making them responsive to public opinion about how high, if at all, a justifiable wealth limit should be.

In Chapter 6, I defend limitarianism against Alexandru Volacu and Adelin Costin Dumitru's (2019) objection that limitarianism is not effective in securing political equality, and that even if it were effective, there would be more efficient means to do so (published as Timmer 2019). I argue that limitarians can support different policies and actions based on their commitment to wealth limits, such as a maximum income and inheritance taxes aimed at dispersing wealth. These policies and actions can be chosen with an eye to efficiency and effectiveness to ensure that limiting how much wealth people can have promotes the values limitarians care about, such as political equality and meeting people's unmet urgent needs.

Let me end by highlighting two contributions of this thesis for future philosophical theorizing. First, it proposes a shift in the characterisation of theories of distributive justice. Rather than saying, for example, that egalitarianism, prioritarianism, and sufficientarianism, are different distributive views, we should examine them as specifications of a single conceptual core, which often includes a threshold. Aside from offering conceptual clarity, this shift also benefits theorising about eclectic and hybrid distributive views, which include concerns for various distributive concerns, such as equality, priority, *and* sufficiency. Second, the account of thresholds in distributive justice can be developed into an account of thresholds in philosophy more generally. Though developing such an account is beyond this thesis' scope, it would be a valuable contribution to contemporary philosophical theorising.

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