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A Reply to Shlomi Segall

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Published in:
Journal of Applied Philosophy

DOI:
10.1111/japp.12159

Publication date:
2016

Document version:
Submitted manuscript

Citation for published version (APA):
Nielsen, L. (2016). Sufficiency Grounded as Sufficiently Free: A Reply to Shlomi Segall. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 33(2), 202-216. <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12159>

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A later version of this paper has been published in Journal of Applied Philosophy.

Sufficiency Grounded as Sufficiently Free: A Reply to Shlomi Segall

ABSTRACT *Telic sufficientarianism is the view that it is better, other things equal, if people are lifted above some sufficiency threshold of special moral importance. In a recent contribution, Shlomi Segall has raised the following objection to this position: The telic ideal of sufficiency can neither be grounded on (i) any personal value, nor (ii) any impersonal value. Consequently, sufficientarianism is groundless. This article contains a rejoinder to this critique. Its main claim is that the value of autonomy holds strong potential for grounding sufficiency. It argues, firstly, that autonomy carries both personal value for its recipient as well as impersonal value, and that both of these values are suitable for grounding sufficiency. It thus follows that we should reject both (i) and (ii). Secondly, although autonomy is presumably the strongest candidate for grounding sufficiency, the article provides some counterargument to Segall's rejection of the other candidates—the impersonal value of virtue; the personal value for the allocator; and the personal value for others. If the arguments are sound, they show that we need not worry about sufficientarianism being groundless.*

In a recent article¹ in *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Shlomi Segall gives the following argument against telic sufficiency:

- (i) Sufficiency cannot be grounded on any personal value;
 - a. Not for the allocator,
 - b. Not for the recipient,
 - c. Not for any other.
- (ii) Sufficiency cannot be grounded on any impersonal value;
 - d. Not virtue,

e. Not autonomy.

(iii) Sufficiency, therefore, is groundless.

Segall provides well-structured arguments in defense of each of the premises (a-e) and concludes upon these arguments that sufficiency is groundless. The following is a rejoinder to his arguments. I believe that the above critique of sufficiency is generally flawed. This is not because the overall argument is not logically valid. Accepting, as I do, the implicit premise that telic principles must be grounded on some value that is either personal or impersonal, I agree that the conclusion (iii) follows from accepting the premises (i) and (ii). Moreover, my rejoinder to the argument is not rooted in the fact that (ii) is a rather vague and open-ended premise. It is obvious that Segall cannot exemplify all possible impersonal values that might come to sufficientarianism's rescue, and I do think that the ones he considers capture the most relevant candidates.² My quarrel with the critique is based on the substance of the premises. In fact, I think we have good reasons to reject both (i) and (ii).

In the following, I shall argue against each one of these premises (a-e). The general line of argument is that Segall's critique is based on a simplistic welfarist conception of value that few sufficientarians accept and that none should accept. Sufficientarians are concerned with the elimination of obstacles of necessity, not with numerical utility measures, and on this account sufficiency can be grounded on both personal and impersonal value. It might be that some of my arguments are less decisive than others and that some are less convincing than others. However, one should keep in mind that Segall's argument is structured as a conjunctive chain of necessary premises and thus I need only to successfully rebut one of the premises (a-e) in order to conclude that sufficiency is not necessarily groundless. And this, I must stress, is my humble purpose here.³

My argument proceeds in the following steps. Sufficientarianism shows most promise if grounded on the value of autonomy. I shall thus first argue that autonomy carries both impersonal and personal value (for the recipient), and that both these types of value are suited for grounding sufficiency. Thus, the first section provides a counterargument to Segall's premises (e) and (b), which serves as my central argument for how sufficiency is most plausibly grounded. I shall then give some attention to the other premises (a), (c), and (d), although I do not believe any of these candidates hold as much potential for grounding sufficiency as autonomy. I nonetheless maintain that Segall's rejection of each of them is misplaced and my discussion of them might serve to show how a non-welfarist can respond to them. If my arguments are sound, we should dismiss this critique and need not worry about sufficiency being groundless.

1. Autonomy-catering sufficiency

Let me begin with the value of autonomy, with which my central rejoinder to Segall is concerned. Would it not make sense to believe that sufficiency represents the critical threshold above which a person is relevantly autonomous—i.e. free from destitution, oppression, and domination and, thus, free to do or be whatever she wants? Segall admits that this may initially sound attractive. However, the value of autonomy, he argues, cannot be impersonal; and if it is not impersonal, it must be personal, but then it cannot ground sufficiency. Thus, either way, autonomy cannot ground sufficiency. I shall argue against Segall that autonomy does in fact carry both impersonal value and personal value (for the recipient), and that both types of value are able to ground sufficiency.

Let me begin by looking at Segall's arguments for Premise (e), that autonomy does not carry impersonal value, and for Premise (b), that personal value for the recipient cannot ground sufficiency. I

shall then turn to rejecting these premises and argue that autonomy does in fact carry value, both personal and impersonal, that firmly grounds sufficiency.

1.1. Segall on autonomy

Segall does not waste any space on backing his case in Premise (e) against the impersonal value of autonomy, so I can repeat his argument in full:

Recall, however, that we are searching for an impersonal value. The difficulty with autonomy in that respect, then, is that it is not quite clear what its *impersonal* aspect might be. Why does it matter that someone is autonomous in a way that is divorced of that (or any other) person's well-being?⁴

Consequently, autonomy has no impersonal value. Or at least, he concludes, this value is “underspecified” and needs more specification if it is to ground sufficiency. Otherwise, if autonomy is to ground sufficiency, it must be because of its personal value. I take the personal value of autonomy for the recipient in question to be the best candidate, but Segall has already at this point ruled out grounding sufficiency on any personal value. Let me therefore turn to his argument for Premise (b), rejecting the possibility that sufficiency can be grounded on personal value for the recipient.

Segall argues the following, using Paul Weirich's caviar example.⁵ Suppose that a spoonful of caviar will produce two units of utility for the recipient, and that we can either give the caviar to Jones at T-1 (one unit below threshold) or to Smith at T+1 (one unit above threshold). Sufficientarians, Segall claims, are committed to preferring to give the caviar to Jones, even though Smith would have gained the same amount of utility had we given it to him. This, Segall concludes, shows that if helping people

who are below threshold to reach the threshold is better than benefitting people who are already above threshold, it cannot be because it is better for the recipient. In a nutshell, if a distributive good will be just as valuable to a recipient above threshold as to a recipient below, but sufficientarians still prefer giving it to the recipient below, the grounding value for sufficiency cannot be attached to the personal value *for* the recipient.

We can summarize Segall's rejection of the possibility of grounding sufficiency on the value of autonomy in the following two claims, related respectively to Premises (e) and (b). First, sufficiency cannot be grounded on the impersonal value of autonomy, because autonomy has no value that is divorced from personal well-being. Second, sufficiency cannot be grounded on the personal value of autonomy for the recipient, because personal utility is not more valuable to people below a certain threshold than it is to people above this threshold.

This two-fold argument holds a welfarist bias. It assumes that all value that is not impersonal is necessarily related to subjective personal utility and, moreover, it rejects the possibility of autonomy being impersonally valuable—that is, being valuable without generating utility benefits—only on intuitive grounds. From a non-welfarist perspective, this is incorrect, and the distinction between impersonal value and the value of utility is not exhaustive but, on the contrary, rather confusing, because autonomy-catering sufficientarians tend to ground their distributive theory on objective value that is either personal for the recipient, impersonal or both. Thus, we would do better by distinguishing between subjective and objective measures of the value of autonomy. I therefore suggest the following distinction between three different but potentially valuable aspects of autonomy.

First, if we claim that autonomy has subjective personal value for the recipient, we mean that this person's autonomy is valuable because of the benefit in utility she achieves from being autonomous. I call this *the subjective-personal value claim of autonomy for the recipient*. Second, if we

claim that autonomy has objective value for the recipient, we mean that autonomy is valuable in some relevant sense for this particular person, regardless of whether or not she achieves any benefit in utility from being autonomous. I call this *the objective-personal value claim for the recipient*. Third and finally, if we claim that autonomy has impersonal value, we mean that it is better in some relevant sense that people are autonomous than if they are not, without this being better *for* anyone in particular (on both subjective-personal and objective-personal measures). I call this *the impersonal value claim of autonomy*.

Segall's arguments against the grounding of sufficiency on personal value for the recipient, Premise (b), assumes *the subjective-personal value claim of autonomy*. Welfarist sufficientarians would have to accommodate his critique while remaining loyal to this view on value if they are to successfully defend sufficientarianism on welfarist grounds. I would be sympathetic to this inquiry, but it is not my purpose here. Instead, I want to show that both *the objective-personal value claim of autonomy for the recipient* and *the impersonal value claim of autonomy* are reasonable views, and that several sufficientarians defend these views. Furthermore, both of these views of the value of autonomy sit well with sufficientarian intuitions and may, in fact, be taken to ground sufficiency.

In the next section I attend to the objective-personal value claim. I defend this claim from the perspective of the capability approach and, especially, those advocates of the approach who defend a sufficiency threshold of capabilities. I then turn to the impersonal value claim, which I defend from a perspective similar to Joseph Raz's and Gerald Dworkin's emphasis on the role autonomy plays for showing respect for each individual as a person. Finally, I end the section by arguing that both the impersonal and the objective-personal value claims of autonomy explain the moral importance of the threshold well enough to ground sufficiency as a distributive principle.

1.2. The objective-personal value of autonomy

There is a sense in which sufficiency may be grounded upon the personal value for the recipient, although, as Segall has shown, it cannot be grounded on the subjective-personal value of utility. I approach this point by revisiting the caviar case. In the way Segall uses the example, the spoonful of caviar equals two units of utility and can be given either to Jones at T-1 or to Smith at T+1. By simple math, it follows that the caviar if given to Jones will help him just above the threshold, and if given to Smith will push him the same amount of utility-units even further above the threshold. But this picture is problematically simplistic. Recall that the motivation for sufficiency is that of eliminating obstacles of necessity such as deprivation, suffering, poverty, and destitution. In light of that, allocating a spoonful of caviar is inevitably irrelevant. If Jones is below threshold, this means that he is bereft of something of critical importance—something is putting serious pressure on his chances of living a successful or dignified life. We can imagine him suffering from hunger or some similar obstacle to a life in dignity, but whatever obstacle it is, offering him caviar misses the mark. The spoonful of caviar is irrelevant to sufficientarians not just because the portion is so insignificant in size that we cannot possibly believe it will make a difference but also because the substance of the good (caviar) is irrelevant to the moral purpose for sufficientarians—that is, to remove obstacles hindering a dignified or successful life from unfolding. Sufficientarians then can, and in fact do, acknowledge that reaching (or even just moving towards reaching) the threshold does hold personal value and that the moral importance of the sufficiency threshold might be grounded on this personal value, but they need not accept that every taste counts.⁶

I have always had a thing for red wine gums and thus it is meaningful to say that according to some utility measurement, giving me the red wine gums instead of the yellow would provide me with three as opposed to only two units of welfare. But no sufficientarian in their right mind would accept

that receiving red and not yellow wine gums would do anything to help me above a morally relevant threshold. Sufficiencyarians distinguish between substance-relevant preferences and irrelevant tastes.⁷ This does not mean, on the other hand, that they disregard the value of preferences by all means, but it implies that the preferences that matter to sufficiencyarian distributive justice are evaluated using an objective criterion of value. Thus, there is an immanent element of moral evaluation of reasoning encased in the sufficiency principle.

Let me attend to some sufficiencyarian reasoning from within the capability approach in order to exemplify how *the objective-personal value claim of autonomy* is defended, and used in a way suited for grounding sufficiency as a distributive principle. One could defend a similar view on value using alternative theoretical frameworks, and my use of the capability approach here is, therefore, meant to serve as an example and not the suggestion of the definite line of reasoning behind the claim. I begin with Amartya Sen's account of agency freedom, and from there I proceed to Martha Nussbaum's list of central human capabilities and to a more recent suggestion of a capability-based sufficiencyarian account of autonomy suggested by David Axelsen and Lasse Nielsen, which they call *the ideal of freedom from duress*.

In elaborating his capability approach as an alternative to welfarist justice, Amartya Sen distinguishes not only between welfare (well-being achievements) on the one side and capabilities on the other, but also within the conception of capability between the opportunity for welfare (well-being freedom) and what he calls *agency freedom*.⁸ The latter conceptualizes autonomy as the effective freedom to pursue a goal that a person has good reason to value, and is morally important, according to Sen, irrespective of whether it increases individual welfare or whether it improves opportunity for welfare. To use Sen's own example, it might very well be that both your actual personal welfare and your opportunity for welfare are decreased by being positioned close to (as opposed to far away from)

an act of crime that you have good reason to prevent (or rectify), but we would still say that the increase in *autonomy* that your position involves carries a morally valuable aspect—namely, the choice to do what you have reason to believe is right.⁹ Sen’s capability approach is a pluralist view and thus capabilities are valuable for various reasons, including the way they relate to opportunity for welfare (and thus also achieved welfare). However, autonomy in the agency-freedom sense plays a significant role in the idea of capabilities and captures a large part of what is valuable about them. Thus, it seems clear that this value relates to the recipient of the agency in question. However, it is similarly clear that what is valuable about autonomy in this sense is divorced from personal well-being and is, thus, essentially objective and not subjective.

Martha Nussbaum’s political philosophy appreciates autonomy in a very similar way. Contrary to Sen, however, she is much more explicit about what the valuable goals of a human life are and thus which effective freedoms we ought to care about.¹⁰ Her suggested list of central human capabilities is created upon a normative account of the natural and social human life¹¹—thus involving an element of Aristotelian essentialism—but is informed by practical reasoning of the public as inspired by Aristotle and, moreover, in a sense indebted to Rawlsian political liberalism.¹² What is valuable about autonomy, according to Nussbaum, is not only that it involves the agency freedom to choose between valuable options, but that the options available to the agent, in order to be perceived as autonomous in the very minimal (sufficient) sense, carry with them the core aspects that constitute a human life. Consequently, not only is autonomy in itself *objectively* valuable, but it carries the freedom to enjoy functionings that are similarly *objectively* valuable.

In their recent defense of sufficientarianism, Axelsen and Nielsen suggest an autonomy-catering threshold understood as the *freedom from duress*, by which they understand “the freedom from significant pressure against succeeding in central aspects of human life.”¹³ People are free from such

pressure when they have effectively secured the necessary capabilities in central areas of life. To argue the moderate perfectionist element that is evident in the narrow focus on only specific “central aspects” of life, they present a thought experiment asking the reader to imagine two separate societies, Squandaria and Succeedia. The two societies are equal in terms of citizens’ level of welfare but differ on how they achieve welfare. Succeedia’s citizens have a sufficient level of freedom in areas such as health and healthcare; rational development and critical thought through education; and social as well as political possibilities, all of which are constitutive of their autonomy. The citizens of Squandaria have insufficient freedom in these areas but have, by contrast, fantastic possibilities in some non-central aspect of life. This fits their subjective preferences well, and they are consequently equal to the citizens of Succeedia in terms of achieved utility.

If one holds that Succeedia is morally superior to Squandaria, which most of us would, it implies that autonomy understood in this way is valuable regardless of the recipient’s subjective appreciation thereof. It might be, of course, that this is because one takes autonomy to carry impersonal value and not objective-personal value, in which case this argument is better placed in the next section than in this one. In any case, the argument serves to justify that autonomy is valuable beyond its subjective-personal gain in utility.

Informed by Nussbaum’s account and, more specifically, the argument provided by Axelsen and Nielsen, we are now well prepared to target Segall’s rejection of Crisp’s Beverly Hills case.¹⁴ Inspired by Andrew Williams,¹⁵ Segall changes the example from its original form, in which the Rich versus Super Rich represents an *interpersonal* inequality, to a case of *intrapersonal* inequality. If the Rich and the Super Rich are not different groups but two possible instances of the *same person*, it is much clearer, Segall maintains, that Super Rich is morally superior to Rich. And if that is the case, sufficientarians need to explain why the inequality in question matters not *interpersonally* but does

matter *intrapersonally* which, according to Segall, they cannot. In my view, the revised intrapersonal Beverly Hills case is similar to the wine gum example above and, therefore, serves to illustrate not only how sufficientarians would respond to high-level inequalities but also how they distinguish between relevant and irrelevant preferences. The choice between red and yellow wine gums matters to me in a straightforward utility-related sense—just as the choice between 1982 Latour and 1982 Lafite matters to very rich people. But none of these preferences matter in the way sufficientarians find morally relevant. In particular, they do not matter in a way relevant for autonomy. We would not say that I was more autonomous if I could choose between red and yellow wine gums instead of just one of them. And, similarly, we would not say the opportunity to choose Latour over Lafite wines makes the Super Rich more autonomous than the Rich. The preferences driving choices such as these, then, do not matter in a way that obliges other people to accommodate them. This is the way personal value for recipients grounds a distributive ideal of sufficiency.

Reaching a level at which a person is autonomous is personally valuable in this sense. It is valuable *for* this person not (only) because of the utility he gets from being autonomous, but because this threshold carries the freedom to choose between options that he himself has reason to value—the latter being a personal value relevant to sufficientarians. If he for some reason does not appreciate this and feels that he would be better off had he not been given these freedoms, then others would take him to be mistaken (partly on grounds of the impersonal value of autonomy and partly due to their own experienced appreciation of autonomy), but that would not discredit the personal value of *his* own autonomy, since it is *de facto* a product of this that he is able to disregard it in the first place.

Both Nussbaum's view and Axelsen and Nielsen's view are, admittedly, controversial. I mention them here because they defend a view of autonomy that is similar to my objective-personal value claim, and because they connect this value of autonomy directly and explicitly to some form of

sufficiency.¹⁶ However, many would think these views involve too thick an element of perfectionism, which would drive us towards paternalism in a way that is problematic from a liberal point of view.¹⁷ Sabine Alkire, for example, gives a less normative-perfectionist account of autonomy—though similarly indebted to Sen’s capability approach—relying on Finnis’ approach of *central human dimensions*.¹⁸ Although there is some room for debate here about the level of perfectionism needed, these accounts agree about the main point in question here: that autonomy is important because it has value for its recipients regardless of anyone’s appreciation thereof, and that this value is, consequently, not subjective- but rather objective-personal.

1.3. The impersonal value of autonomy

Let me attend very briefly to some reflections about whether autonomy has *impersonal* value. Recall that, in my account, autonomy carries impersonal value when it is better in some relevant sense that people are autonomous than if they are not, without this being better *for* anyone in particular. This might seem to be a difficult statement to defend, but it seems nonetheless that some sufficientarians who base their view on the importance of autonomy do defend such a position.

In Joseph Raz’s philosophy, the liberal conception of autonomy is captured by the ideal of self-authorship—the ideal that one is the creator of one’s life—and, not least, loyalty towards one’s goals entailed in the conception of integrity.¹⁹ Like the capability approach, Raz’s conception of autonomy holds a human practice element that is evident in his use of the terms “authorship” or “creator of life” and relies upon the same aspect of practical reasoning, enabling the agent to identify and to pursue valuable goals in life. Moreover, similar to Sen’s account, Raz’s ideal of autonomy entails an open-minded plurality towards what may count as valuable goals in life. Thus, autonomy may be valuable to each of its possessors for various personal reasons; that is, every singular agent may value the

opportunity for personal welfare that autonomy carries. But importantly for Raz, autonomy is distinctively morally valuable in its own right. In the words of Michael Blake on his reading of Raz, “Autonomy [...] is a matter of respect for human creatures as agents able to develop specific plans, attachments and interests; as such, it is committed to a pluralism about the specific ways of life to which this autonomous pursuit might be directed.”²⁰ And, as pointed out by Raz himself, autonomy is valuable even though it might in some cases be the cause of failure rather than success,²¹ which highlights the distinctively impersonal aspect of the value of autonomy.

The emphasis on the importance of autonomy as a sort of respect of the individual as a person—being the creator of his own life—sits well with Gerald Dworkin’s reasoning.²² Although Dworkin’s view is less perfectionistic than Raz’s, it shares the acceptance of the impersonal value claim in that autonomy is something that every person is owed out of respect for personhood in itself. The emphasis here on *respect* for others as not only creatures but human *persons* resonates with central elements of relational egalitarianism, such as that of Elizabeth Anderson’s, with its focus on securing for everyone sufficient capabilities for functioning in a democratic society based on respectful social relations.²³ Here again it is the element of autonomy that respectful social relations carry with them that grounds the premises on which relational egalitarianism relies. This ideal of autonomy is at the heart of Raz’s and Dworkin’s as well as Anderson’s philosophies and is, in all these cases, valued on impersonal grounds.

Here, some readers might be confused about the distinction between the impersonal and objective-personal value of autonomy, which I admit is also not always clear to me. One problem is that most theorists who defend autonomy as the ground for a distributive principle emphasize the objective-personal value of autonomy (which I have argued that Segall overlooks), and that those who stress the impersonal value accept that it carries personal value as well (which I take to in fact be the

case for Raz, Dworkin as well as Anderson). The distinction is important here in order to highlight the false simplicity of Segall's critique but might otherwise be irrelevant in practice. The most important distinction lies between subjective value and objective (personal and/or impersonal) value. I will therefore attend to the next step in my rejoinder to Segall and show how the value of autonomy (in any case) holds strong potential for grounding sufficiency.

1.4. Sufficiency grounded

It is possible that one might agree that autonomy carries objective-personal and (or) impersonal value and thus agree with my rejection of Segall's argument *for* Premises (e) and (b), but still believe that Premise (e) or Premise (b) is in fact true. In other words, it is reasonable at this point to believe that although autonomy is valuable beyond its subjective utility value, this value cannot in any case ground sufficiency. Here, I shall argue that autonomy can in fact ground sufficiency and that it fits sufficientarian intuitions well.

Contrary to egalitarians, proponents of sufficiency are troubled by absolute level deficits as opposed to relative differences. Egalitarians believe it is bad that one group is at 12 if another group is at 22 (simply by relative measure). Sufficientarians don't care about numbers. They care about deprivation, suffering, poverty, destitution, etc., and numbers alone do not make any sense in this light. This is the reason why Raz is concerned with "the hunger of the hungry, the need of the needy, the suffering of the ill, and so on."²⁴ Similarly, it is why Nussbaum believes there to be a "[...] tragic aspect to any choice in which citizens are pushed below the threshold in one of the central areas,"²⁵ and why Crisp's threshold is derived from the point "at which compassion enters."²⁶ Numerical comparisons only make sense to sufficientarians if it is understood what the numbers account for. For example, if someone is at 12 and someone else is at 22, and hunger is a circumstance at 12 but

eliminated at 20, sufficientarians would be very disturbed by the 12-20 difference but would not care about the 20-22 difference. In fact, they would probably be skeptical about how to make sense of this difference at all. If it is anything like a spoonful of caviar then why, they would ask, should anyone care?

Autonomy-catering sufficientarians would say that what is so critical about being below the threshold is that it deprives autonomy. Deprivation, suffering, poverty, and destitution take away a person's ability to do or be what she wants; to be an author of her own life. It is not because the hungry like food or because they would be happier had they possessed food that hunger is troubling, but because hunger is a circumstance that deprives a person's agency, capabilities, and ability to recognize and pursue valuable goals in life.

This value specifically supports sufficiency in three ways. First, it explains why we are so critically troubled by people being below threshold. If autonomy is valuable in the way argued here, it is evidently morally problematic that there exist people who are deprived their autonomy. Second, it explains why benefitting people matters more the farther below threshold they are. This is not a linear relationship, but it is reasonable to believe that the more deprivation, suffering, poverty, or destitution a person's circumstances involve, the harder the pressure on that person's autonomy and therefore on their chances of living a successful life. Finally, it explains why we should not care—or care significantly less, for pluralist sufficientarians believing that other things matter once autonomy is secured—about differences above the threshold. Whereas the importance of eliminating obstacles to autonomy is of obvious moral importance, it is significantly less important to provide more resources for the already autonomous person. Once hunger has been eliminated and thus autonomy (at least in this specific minimal sense) secured, the now newly well-fed person does not gain in autonomy from receiving more nutritional goods. Autonomy, in the words of Michael Blake, “does not seem to demand

the maximization of the number of options open to us.”²⁷ Or, as similarly put by Dworkin, “in the realm of choice, as in all others, we must conclude—enough is enough.”²⁸

Hence, the value of autonomy does capture the sufficientarian logic of diminishing moral reason to benefit as deprivation decreases, up to a cut-off point at which reasons to benefit further are eliminated. Autonomy, though critically important when absent, is not a value, like utility, that craves maximization. It is a threshold-seeking, not a maximization-craving, value. Thus, with regard to whether the impersonal value of autonomy is underspecified, as Segall claims, it seems that although the value of the *presence* of autonomy may be difficult to specify, the value of eliminating obstacles to autonomy always has a very specified outlook (such as in the case of hunger or deprivation). Not only do these reflections upon the nature and moral importance of autonomy resonate with sufficientarian intuitions, they also give us reasons to favor sufficiency as the telic ideal of moral distributive theory. Autonomy, thus, does hold some potential as a grounding value for sufficiency.

This concludes my rejoinder to Segall’s rejection of the possibility of grounding sufficiency on the value of autonomy. The central claim of my argument is that Segall misunderstands the type of value that sufficientarians typically ascribe to autonomy—i.e. he assumes the subjective-personal value claim whereas most sufficientarians accept the objective-personal value claim or the impersonal value claim. I have further argued that both the objective-personal and the impersonal value claims hold potential for grounding sufficiency.

In the remainder of the article, I briefly comment on the other premises in Segall’s critique in light of my reflections on autonomy. Admittedly, this is unnecessary since rejecting only one of Segall’s premises is enough to disprove his claim. Furthermore, my comments on the remaining premises cannot be taken to actually reject the premises, since they will build upon the assumption that autonomy is in fact what grounds the sufficiency threshold. Therefore, in a way, I have already

accepted that it is neither the impersonal value of virtue nor personal value for the allocator or others that grounds sufficiency. I still find it nonetheless useful, following my reflections on autonomy, to discuss Segall's arguments against these candidates—if for no other reason than for stipulating how non-welfarists might respond to these critiques.

2. Virtue

Against *virtue* (d), Segall provides the following argument. Suppose that Bob suffers from some medical condition that will respond effectively to either Treatment X or Treatment Y. If the former, it means that Bob's condition is now just below threshold at 19 (Threshold=20), and that X will help him reach 21. If the latter, it means that Bob is now just above threshold at 21 and that Y will help him reach 30. As Bob's caretaker, you are faced with the following dilemma: You can give him X and thereby secure him at level 21 (but only 21) in any case. Thus, X (21, 21). Or you can give him Y and make him face a 50 percent risk of being at 19 with a 50 percent chance of reaching 30. Thus, Y (19, 30). Sufficientarians would prefer giving Bob X, but since Y represents the rational choice in terms of expected utility, Segall argues, X cannot be the *virtuous* choice. Virtue therefore, he concludes, cannot ground sufficiency.

Let us consider Segall's argument against virtue with our reflections about autonomy in mind. Recall that you as Bob's caretaker can choose whether to give him Treatment X, securing him at 21 no matter what, or Treatment Y, risking that he will be at 19 but giving him a 50 percent chance of reaching 30. Since the virtuous agent would choose what is best for Bob, it would not be particularly virtuous to give him X, Segall claims, since the (19, 30) outcome is the "more rational (in terms of expected utility) option."²⁹ But why should virtue have anything to do with rational choice? I agree with Segall that if this situation is like a gamble involving units of utility in this very simplistic forward

linear form, the virtuous agent should opt for Treatment Y, since the 50 percent chance of winning 9 units would outweigh the 50 percent risk of losing only 2 units. However, most sufficientarians, as I have exemplified above, reject this type of welfarism. They are concerned with eliminating obstacles of necessity such as deprivation, suffering, poverty, and destitution; not about whether to reach 21 or 30. More specifically, if the threshold is at 20, as Segall assumes, then autonomy-catering sufficientarians would take autonomy in the relevant sense to begin at this point. Consequently, 30 represents being autonomous and *then some*, whereas 19 involves a relevant lack of autonomy. In that case, it seems very plausible to hold that it is, in fact, *perfectly virtuous* to prefer for someone the outcome of X (21, 21) to the more utility-maximizing outcome of Y (19, 30). In other words, if X represents security of autonomy and Y does not, and if virtue require us to choose what we think best for Bob, then it is in fact virtuous to prefer X over Y. Therefore, we should reject Premise (d) upon the basis of autonomy as the grounding value of sufficiency.

Moreover, non-welfarist sufficientarians who are not autonomy-catering in the sense I have defended here suggest alternative threshold-grounding values that might equally well defend virtue in a similar vein. This is the case for basic rights sufficientarians such as Henry Shue³⁰ and basic needs sufficientarians such as David Miller.³¹ Without going into more detail to defend such versions of sufficiency against Segall's groundlessness challenge, it seems that they would be able to say the same thing in the specific case of virtue. If basic rights are fulfilled and basic needs are met at 20, then again it seems perfectly virtuous to prefer for another the outcome (21, 21) to the outcome (19, 30).

3. The Allocator

With regard to the good of the *allocator* (a), Segall discusses Roger Crisp's compassion principle.³² Segall holds that since the compassion in Crisp's writings is an expression of the virtue of the allocator,

it is reasonable to interpret Crisp's version of the sufficiency principle as grounded on the personal value of the allocator. He then gives this argument:

[...] suppose that in Outcome X Smith lies below the threshold, whereas in Outcome Y he is lifted by an accident of nature over the threshold (suppose that he has struck a vein of gold). There is no more virtue in Y compared to X, yet sufficientarians unanimously hold that Y is better than X. The moral betterment of the allocator cannot therefore explain what makes certain outcomes better on *telic* sufficientarianism.³³

Thus, essentially, since the *betterness* of Outcome Y is completely independent of the *betterment* of the allocator, sufficiency cannot be grounded on the personal value for the allocator.

As mentioned above, I shall not attempt to defend the grounding of sufficiency on the personal value for the allocator, which I believe would be rather weak. However, I would like to raise one point in favor of the value, from the personal perspective of the allocator in helping someone else reach the threshold. I have already argued—somewhat along the lines of Crisp's compassion principle—that since sufficiency concerns the elimination of necessity obstacles, it is *virtuous* to help people reach the threshold level. My further argument here is that this act of virtue is also good from the allocator's *personal* point of view. If this is true, it gives us reason to question Segall's claim that the *betterness* of the outcome (that some recipient reaches threshold) is completely independent of the *betterment* of the allocator.³⁴

As already argued, sufficientarians should and do dismiss the simplistic welfarist view on value on which Segall's critique relies. If adopting instead a virtue ethicist account of personal value such as the Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, often referred to as flourishing (which would fit the objective-personal

account of value defended with regard to autonomy), the connection between the act of virtue and the good for the virtuous is immanent. This is because *eudaimonia*, contrary to utility, comes not through the simple satisfaction of preference but through the unfolding of essential human purpose or function (*ergon*); and because the human purpose contains (among other essentials) the practices of the virtues mediated through practical reasoning in social life.³⁵ That is, practicing the virtue of compassion aims for betterness in the outcome for a specific victim of suffering,³⁶ but by exercising this particular virtue the allocator engages in a human practice that is essentially valuable to him. This is not necessarily in the simplistic welfarist sense of subjective-personal value, but in a sense similar to the value carried by engaging in political life or in the exercise of artistic or musical expression—valuable because it is a practice actualizing human potential.³⁷

Why should this eudemian view of personal value attached to the allocator give us reason to claim that sufficiency can, as such, be grounded on this value? My argument is not that it should. Obviously, Segall is correct that sufficiency (if valuable at all) is valuable even though no act of a virtuous agent brought it about. But the claim from virtue ethicists here is that it is, at least in one respect, even better if sufficiency were the result of virtue and not just accident, due to the value that the exercise of virtue re-produces in the life of the virtuous. If betterness of outcome is to be understood on sufficientarian grounds and we accept that the virtuous agent benefits from bringing this state of betterness about, then it is unclear why the personal value for the allocator should be left aside, although admittedly it cannot (at least in itself) ground an ideal of sufficiency.

4. Others

This leaves the final candidate, the value for *others* (c). Can the value grounding sufficiency be the personal value for individuals other than the allocator and the recipient? Segall says no, and he does so

based on two arguments. First, he considers the possibility that it might be better for third parties if as many as possible have lives above some threshold level representing autonomy or democratic capability (to capture Elizabeth Anderson’s relational egalitarianism). He rejects this possibility because of this scenario:

A (17, 21) B (19, 23) C (21, 22)

Second, he considers the possibility of grounding sufficiency on the value for society as a whole, but he rejects this possibility because of a slightly different scenario:

A (17, 21) B (19, 25) C (21, 22)

Here is Segall’s argument for Premise (c). Sufficiency, he argues, cannot be grounded on its personal value for others—e.g. the value that everyone enjoys sufficient democratic capabilities, as suggested by Anderson’s sufficientarianism—due to the fact that the relevant *third parties* would prefer Outcome B (19; 23) to Outcome C (21; 22) in the first scenario, because 23 is better for them than 22 (despite everyone being above $T=20$ in C). Similarly, it cannot be grounded on the personal value for *society as a whole*, since society should prefer Outcome B (19; 25) to Outcome C (21; 22) in the second scenario, since aggregated utility is higher in the former than in the latter.

It is doubtlessly true that if these scenarios were instances of utility-maximizing games, such as in microeconomic game theory, it would be irrational to question Segall’s conclusions. However, this is nothing like game theory. If one is not a welfarist, there is no good reason to believe (19; 25) to be better than (21; 22)—not for others and not for society as a whole—and Segall’s critique holds no

argument for why we should accept welfarism in the first place. Anderson, like the other autonomy-catering sufficientarians I discuss in this paper, is explicitly non-welfarist. There is no reason why any Andersonian society—emphasizing the importance of democratic capabilities—would give priority to higher aggregated utility over securing sufficiency. Therefore, this is a very weak objection to the kind of sufficientarianism raised. If sufficiency is fulfilled at 20, as we assume with Segall, it means that the 19-21 difference from B to C marks the protection of human autonomy; or more specifically in accordance with Anderson’s account, it marks the beginning of a democratic society based upon respectful social relations that secure the necessary capabilities for unfolding the autonomous life of the human person. This is surely a critical juncture and may therefore justify significant concern for establishing this exact development. In addition, if, as I have argued above, an increased number of choices does very little to improve autonomy above this point, it seems perfectly reasonable to care especially for the protection of one’s autonomy. For Anderson and likeminded sufficientarians, building a society in which a threshold of autonomy is reached for all is important for *everyone*, both as the relevant *others* and as representing *society as a whole*. It thus seems that even if Segall is correct in concluding that the personal value for others cannot (at least in itself) ground sufficiency, his arguments for this conclusion are weak, and he is too hasty to dismiss the possibility that helping people reach the threshold does carry personal value for others as well.

Conclusion

If telic sufficientarianism is to be rescued from Segall’s groundlessness challenge, sufficiency must be grounded on either personal or impersonal value. Here I have argued that sufficiency can in fact be grounded on both. Most importantly, the value of autonomy explains why morality is significantly concerned with people below a relevant threshold level and does not care significantly about

inequalities above a threshold. Some sufficientarians ground this conclusion on the personal value of autonomy for the recipient, while others do so on the impersonal value of autonomy. Either way, the fact that autonomy is a threshold-seeking rather than a maximization-craving good explains its strong candidacy for grounding sufficiency. And although the other candidates considered by Segall seem to hold less potential for grounding sufficiency, I have argued that the critique of the value they carry is flawed. In conclusion, we have significant reasons to believe that sufficiency can be grounded on both impersonal and personal value and that telic sufficientarianism is, consequently, not groundless.

¹ Shlomi Segall, "What is the Point of Sufficiency?", *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (online first) 2014.

² He also considers "desert" and "weighted priority to the worse-off" as possible candidates which I have left out here, simply because I agree with Segall that these can quite easily be dismissed.

³ That is, I admit that there are some very relevant objections to sufficiency that any sufficientarian should take seriously which I leave aside here. See Paula Casal, "Why Sufficiency is Not Enough", *Ethics* 117,2 (2007): 296-326.

⁴ Segall op cit., 14.

⁵ Paul Weirich, "Utility tempered with Equality", *Noûs* 17,3 (1983): 423-439.

⁶ Though my argument again takes its cue from autonomy-catering sufficiency, I take it that some more welfarist sufficientarians would agree. For example, I suppose this distinction between relevant personal value and simply (irrelevant) tastes are the reason why Huseby is concerned with "reasonable contentment" instead of simply "contentment". See Robert Huseby, "Sufficientarianism: Restated and defended", *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18,2 (2010): 178-197.

⁷ Much in accordance, I believe, with Thomas Scanlon's distinction between "urgent preferences" and "desires". See T. M. Scanlon, "Preference and Urgency", *The Journal of Philosophy* 72(19) (1975): 655-669.

⁸ Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 59-62. See also Amartya Sen, "Capability and well-being", in Sen, A. & Nussbaum, M. (eds.), *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 30-53.

⁹ Sen 1992 op cit., p. 60.

¹⁰ Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 78-80.

¹¹ See Martha Nussbaum 2000 op cit., p. 81.

¹² See Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 89.

¹³ David V. Axelsen & Lasse Nielsen, "Sufficiency as Freedom from Duress", *Journal of Political Philosophy*, early online view (2014).

¹⁴ Segall op cit., p. 10.

¹⁵ Andrew Williams, "The Priority View Bites the Dust?", *Utilitas* 24,3 (2012): 315-331.

¹⁶ See Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 43. See also Axelsen & Nielsen op cit.

¹⁷ I have defended this kind of perfectionism elsewhere. See *Omitted for anonymity*

¹⁸ See Sabine Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 16-17.

¹⁹ Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 382.

²⁰ Michael Blake, "Distributive Justice, State Coercion, and Autonomy", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 30,3(2001): 257-296.

²¹ Raz 1986 op cit. 384.

²² Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 31.

²³ Elizabeth Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?", *Ethics* 109,2 (1999): 287-337.

²⁴ Raz 1986 op cit., p. 240.

²⁵ Nussbaum 2000 op cit., p. 81.

²⁶ Crisp 2003 op cit., 758.

²⁷ In fact, he continues, informed by Gerald Dworkin, “[I]ndeed, it seems plausible that past a certain point, having further options may actually reduce our ability to make sense of and organize our lives in accordance with our plans”. See Blake 2005 op cit., p. 269.

²⁸ Dworkin op cit., p 81.

²⁹ Segall 2014 op cit., p. 13.

³⁰ Henry Shue, *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

³¹ David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Chap. 7.

³² Roger Crisp, ”Equality, Priority, and Compassion”, *Ethics* 113,4 (2003): 745-763.

³³ Segall 2014 op cit., p. 5.

³⁴ For a useful establishment of the connection between these two forms of value, see Kathleen Wilkes, “The Good Man and the Good for Man in Aristotle’s Ethics”, *Mind* 87,348 (1978): 553-571.

³⁵ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a8-27.

³⁶ There is some disagreement among virtue ethicists on the place of the practical element. According to Crisp, for example, compassion is not a practice in itself but an emotional reaction to the impression of suffering demanding an appropriate practical response. Roger Crisp, “Compassion and Beyond” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11 (2008):233-246.

³⁷ Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics*, 1212a1-3.