


ARTICLE

# Sufficiency and the Minimally Good Life

Nicole Hassoun\* 

Binghamton University, Vestal, USA

\*Corresponding author. Email: [nhassoun@binghamton.edu](mailto:nhassoun@binghamton.edu)

## Abstract

What, if anything, do we owe others as a basic minimum? Sufficiency theorists claim that we must provide everyone with enough – but, to date, few well-worked-out accounts of the sufficiency threshold exist, so it is difficult to evaluate this proposition. Previous theories do not provide plausible, independent accounts of resources, capabilities, or welfare that might play the requisite role. Moreover, I believe existing accounts do not provide nearly enough guidance for policymakers. So, this article sketches a mechanism for arriving at an account of the minimally good life that can help locate the sufficiency threshold.

What, if anything, do we owe others as a basic minimum? Sufficiency theorists claim that we must provide everyone with enough – but, to date, few well-worked out accounts of the sufficiency threshold exist, so it is difficult to evaluate this proposition. Previous theories do little more than gesture towards independent accounts of resources, capabilities, or welfare that might play the requisite role (Nussbaum, 2000; Nickel, 2007; Haybron, 2008; Brock, 2009; Hassoun, 2009; Segall, 2014; Huseby, 2020). Moreover, I believe existing accounts do not provide nearly enough guidance for policymakers (Huseby, 2010; Nielsen, 2016; Herlitz, 2018). If sufficiency theory's positive thesis is defensible, if justice requires helping everyone secure a basic minimum, what does that require? This article sketches a mechanism for arriving at an account of the minimally good life that can help locate a plausible sufficiency threshold – one that might inform theories about what members of just societies owe to each other as a basic minimum (Haybron, 2007; Tiberius, 2008; Angner, 2011). Doing so does not, on its own, establish that justice requires this much, nor is this account intended to support the thesis that we do not owe each other more than this – sufficiency theory's negative thesis (though that may be so). Rather, on the assumption that we do owe each other some basic minimum, this article attempts to locate a plausible answer to what this might require.

More precisely, this article aims to provide an account that, unlike previous proposals, fulfills two desiderata. First, it is *minimal* enough to secure wide agreement from those who endorse different theories about what social justice requires (but who also endorse the idea that some minimum is necessary) without sacrificing plausibility.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Some reject the claim that we need an account of the basic minimum because they do not think we must ensure people can secure any such thing. Most notably, libertarians who reject any positive

I will suppose that an adequate account could not require, for instance, that people have everything that they might benefit from, nor should it require sacrificing things of greater importance to ensure that people secure a basic minimum. Second, I hope to provide a standard *sufficiently robust* so that there is no reason to seriously doubt that an individual who lives a minimally good life can secure a basic minimum. That is, I will suppose people should be able to live choiceworthy lives and have some things that make their lives good for them, but that they require more than this to secure a basic minimum. Those who commit suicide for good causes may live choiceworthy lives, for instance, but I will suppose it is not enough to provide people only with that opportunity (Rawls, 1971; Braybrooke, 1987; Arneson, 1999; Arneson, 2006; Lin, 2017a; Lin, 2017b). I will argue that a few of the main proposals for a basic minimum in the literature fail to satisfy one or both of these desiderata. Further research is necessary to defend this account of the basic minimum against other capability, opportunity, resourcist, needs, and welfarist alternatives (Sen, 1980; Brock, 1998; Dworkin, 2000; Nussbaum, 2011).

### The minimally good life

Although I will unpack each of the conditions in my account below, it can be summarized this way: To live minimally good lives, people need (1) an adequate range of the (2) fundamental conditions for (3) securing those (4) relationships, pleasures, knowledge, appreciation, and worthwhile activities and so forth that (5) a reasonable and caring person free from coercion and constraint would set as a minimal standard of justifiable aspiration.

I will defend this account of the minimally good life, in part, by arguing that each condition is plausible on its own and explaining why employing this mechanism for arriving at an account of the basic minimum is important for respecting each person's fundamental moral equality. We must only set standards for others under which we would be content to live – exercising reasonable care in making this determination. Moreover, no one should be unjustifiably coerced or constrained in deciding whether a life qualifies as minimally good. That said, the full justification for the account is coherentist. What I will say about (1)–(4) can, ultimately, only be vindicated by (5). Similarly, if a free, reasonable, and caring person would not agree with what I say about (1)–(4), I also take that to be a mark against (5).

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obligations, do not think that we owe people any basic minimum (Nozick, 1974). Even utilitarians and prioritarians, who are willing to sacrifice some for the greater good, reject the claim that there should be such a minimum (Arneson, 1999, 2000). As for those who acknowledge a basic minimum, some endorse “upward distribution” and believe it is better to help someone just below the threshold reach the minimum rather than someone who is further below it come closer to the threshold (Dorsey, 2012, 70). Others prefer to resolve tensions between helping different people by appealing to the importance of the things that help people secure a basic minimum (for some proposals, see: Raz, 1986, 308–08; Waldron, 1993). Some introduce multiple thresholds – suggesting we give priority to helping people live lives worth living before helping people reach the threshold for living a minimally good life (or vice versa) (Casal, 2007; Huseby, 2020). Some agree that everyone should be able to secure the basic minimum but also maintain that we owe people more than this (Casal, 2007; Arneson, 2000). Yet others bring other considerations into the picture; desert, luck, responsibility and so forth may be relevant in modifying the role a basic minimum should play in a theory of justice (Dworkin, 2000; Fleurbaey, 2001; Miller, 2001; Tan, 2004). The article does not attempt to resolve these disagreements. For present purposes, I just assume that we need a substantive account of at least one threshold as part of an adequate theory of justice.

### The first four conditions in the account

The claim that people only need an *adequate range* of the conditions for living minimally good lives suggests that the minimally good human life need not be perfect, but it should contain some things of value, pleasure, and significance. On the other hand, a human life may not be minimally good even if it has many of these things in it. A minimally good life must be doubtlessly worth living, not just enduring. The adequacy thresholds for securing the things that make lives minimally good must be set so that the life is well worth living – a life at the lowest level of flourishing.

The fundamental conditions (resources, capacities, and institutions) for living a minimally good life include conditions that are *necessary and jointly sufficient* for securing the things that make lives minimally good (relationships, pleasures, knowledge, appreciation, and worthwhile activities etc.). Things are *necessary* for living a minimally good life when one cannot live such a life without them. When one has all the conditions necessary to secure the things that make one's life minimally good, the conditions together are *jointly sufficient* for such a life. One needs some conditions that are merely *important* for living minimally well – that make a central contribution to individuals' ability to live such lives or are characteristic of them without being strictly necessary on their own for doing so – because it is not enough if people only have one difficult path available for securing the things that make their lives minimally good (Nussbaum, 2000).<sup>2</sup> At least for one's access to the things one needs to live minimally well to be secure, one requires an adequate range of decent options. I say people need access to the conditions for securing a minimally good life (and not just the things that let them live minimally well) to give enough content to the account for policymakers to implement it: policymakers must provide people with resources like clean water and adequate food, for instance, even when those resources are not of ultimate importance.

Many things are *fundamental conditions* for a minimally good life. People require resources, capacities, and institutional structures amongst other things (Liao, 2015). Everyone needs adequate food and water and most require some amount of education, shelter, social and emotional goods and other resources. Furthermore, people must secure basic capacities, liberty, and autonomy (Griffin, 1986; Kraut, 1994). Everyone should have the ability to think and connect with other people, understand and embrace things of value, and develop skills (Arneson, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Dorsey, 2012). People require social and institutional structures to develop their capacities and secure the things that make lives minimally good. In short, everyone requires the internal and external, natural and social, conditions for securing these things.

One's access to the things that make lives minimally good is *secure* when it is, normally, not too difficult for one to attain them and one is not at great risk of losing this access. To be secure, one's attainment of some of the things necessary for living a minimally good life cannot come at the cost of attaining other things on the list. Although people may live well enough for some time without access to some of the conditions that are only important (and on their own not strictly necessary) for living minimally well, losing access to enough of these things typically undermines individuals' ability to live minimally well. Those living close to the poverty line without adequate health insurance or welfare provisions can, for instance, easily lose the things they need to live minimally well and this insecurity itself can undermine their ability to live well enough.

<sup>2</sup>Empirical evidence supports many of these ideas.

Finally, many things may make lives minimally good including *relationships, pleasure, knowledge, appreciation, and worthwhile activities* (Griffin, 1986; Arneson, 1999; Tiberius, 2008). Although I cannot hope to give a full account of each of these things here, briefly consider why this is so. Worthwhile activities often give people a sense of the meaning essential for a minimally good human existence. Usually, people need to be able to choose from more than one thing worth doing to exercise sufficient autonomy to live well enough and most value making some contribution through their life's work. Similarly, both small and great pleasures contribute to our ability to live minimally well. They give our lives variety and interest. Those whose lives are devoid of pleasure are usually severely depressed and may lack the desires necessary to engage fruitfully with others and the world. Aesthetic appreciation and deep knowledge and understanding typically contribute to individuals' ability to live well. But even if people can live well enough without either, some kinds of knowledge and appreciation are necessary. At least an elementary education (and usually much more than that), and the ability to appreciate what one needs to survive and flourish, are prerequisites for most to live well enough. Moreover, most people find close personal relationships add great value to their lives and those without friends or family may find it hard to live minimally well (especially if they lose these relationships early). This list is not exhaustive. Severe forms of discrimination can also undermine individuals' ability to minimally good lives, for instance (Sen, 1999). Protecting individuals' ability to live minimally well safeguards their basic moral status or dignity (Tasioulas, 2013; Killmister, 2017).

To some extent, what is necessary for people to live minimally good lives is determined by historical circumstance. As Adam Smith pointed out, in some societies people need a linen shirt to take part in public life (Smith, 1776/1904; Chase and Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, 2014). Food and other resources have to be culturally appropriate (Sen, 1999). Some people are so committed to particular cultural practices, ways of life, or societies that they can only flourish within them. Other people require opportunities or resources that are not available when, or where, they live but that they might foreseeably secure in the future.

People can be mistaken about what is necessary for a minimally good life (Sen, 1980; Sen, 1999; Haybron, 2007; Haybron, 2008). While it matters that people fulfill some important desires, some things contribute to a person's flourishing for other reasons. There is a difference between matters of preference and urgency.<sup>3</sup> We can be surprised to find things that make our lives go better (Haybron, 2007; Haybron, 2008).

### The justifiable aspiration standard

Before explaining how we can figure out to what people can justifiably aspire and how I understand the things that make a life minimally good in more detail, it is important to distinguish between what people need to live the kind of minimally good lives at issue and the much lower standard applicable for reasonably affirming that even some of the most severely disadvantaged live minimally good lives. This article is concerned with what will enable people to live minimally good lives in what Dan Haybron calls a "justified aspiration" sense; this is a standard that everyone should get as close as possible to securing (Haybron, 2013, ch. 8). Note that the phrase "justifiable aspiration" is used here in a purely technical sense – we would normally say people can justifiably aspire to securing significantly more than a basic minimum; here we are concerned with what standard everyone should get as close as possible to securing. When someone does not

<sup>3</sup>See Scanlon (1975), though I do not take the latter to be determined by consensus in a society.

reach this standard, however, we can sometimes still “reasonably affirm” that the person lives a minimally good life *given the constraints of possibility* (Haybron, 2013, ch. 8). Even some of the most severely mentally and physically disabled people live minimally good lives in this “reasonable affirmation” sense (Kittay 2005). But it is the “justifiable aspiration” sense of the minimally good life that is at issue here.<sup>4</sup>

We can get a sense of what will make lives minimally good in the “justified aspiration” sense – what *a reasonable and caring person free from coercion and constraint would set as a minimal standard of justifiable aspiration* – by considering what someone about whom we know little will need for a life at the lowest level of flourishing.<sup>5</sup> The person’s difficulties, pains, losses, and frustrations must be sufficiently compensated for by relationships, pleasures, and worthwhile activities that one would not seriously doubt their ability to satisfactorily live it. Moreover, at any point in time, this must be the case for their life to reach the threshold for a minimally good one. The question is not whether any given individual would trade her current life for a minimally good one – many fortunate individuals would not. Rather, it is whether there are any serious reasons to doubt that the life could be well-lived.

Consider what makes people reasonable, caring, and free from coercion and constraint. To be *reasonable*, people must be committed to seeing other people as free and equal (Rawls, 1971; Rawls, 1980). Reasonable people want to live with other people on mutually agreeable, fair terms and will sometimes sacrifice their own interests to do so (Rawls, 1971). Other people’s legitimate interests – both the interests these people recognize and the interests they do not – move those who care about them (Nussbaum, 2006). Caring people want, and are inclined to act, to promote other people’s interests in proportion to their weight. Finally, people are free from coercion and constraint when they have some internal and external freedom; they can reason about, make, and carry out their own plans and they have decent options and bargaining power (Raz, 1986; Hassoun, 2011; Hassoun, 2012).

Consider, then, how reasonable and caring people free from coercion and constraint would reason about the standard necessary for living a minimally good life. As John Rawls suggests, reasonable people would not set a standard for other people under which reasonable people themselves would not be content to live (Rawls, 1971; Rawls, 1980). The basic idea is simple: People should be content to bear the costs of living the “merely” minimally good lives the least fortunate will live when setting this standard. The question is not whether the person one is deciding for will be content, as, for example, that person’s preferences may be adaptive.<sup>6</sup> Rather it is whether a reasonable, free, caring person would now (reflecting on, but not yet occupying, the person’s life) be content to live that life. The reasonable, free, caring person must fully understand the other person’s circumstances, psychology, and history in deciding whether they would be content to live as the other person (Frankfurt, 1988).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>It is this standard that lets us explain why there is something tragic even about some lives we can reasonably affirm – those who live them have a justified aspiration to secure much more.

<sup>5</sup>We might also get a sense for what makes lives minimally good by considering what makes our lives distinctively human, although it is not the fact that something is necessary for a distinctively human existence, considered apart from the value of that kind of existence, that makes it valuable (Dorsey, 2010). It is hard to see how a life might be minimally good and yet not guarantee for people the things necessary for a distinctly human (and valuable) existence.

<sup>6</sup>For more on why we must also care for other people to figure out what they need, see Nussbaum (2006).

<sup>7</sup>This way of thinking about contentment develops the Frankfurtian view extended by Huseby, 2020. I hope that it provides a tool that helps policymakers and others think about where to draw a sufficiency threshold.

To see why reasonable, caring, free people would employ the preceding test, consider what (free) reasonable care requires.<sup>8</sup> Reasonable, caring, free people must try to fully understand emotionally, and otherwise, what it is like to live as other people do by appreciating other people's history as well as their current states. This is what Darwall calls "projective empathy" (Darwall, 2002, 61–62). When we empathize in this way, we share other people's feelings as their perspectives warrant (Darwall, 2002, 62). As Adam Smith put it: "in order to enter into your grief, I do not consider what I, a person of such a character and profession, should suffer, if I had a son, and if that son were unfortunately to die; but I consider what I would suffer if I were you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters" (Smith, 1759/2002, §371). Projective empathy is different from proto-sympathetic empathy, which is a version of the sympathetic concern Darwall endorses.<sup>9</sup> Proto-sympathetic empathy requires self-consciously reflecting on the state of the person with whom one is emphasizing (Darwall, 2002, 67). Reasonable, caring, free people will empathize with other people but then consider what is necessary to contentedly live other people's lives given others' current states, not just how other people do, or might, feel about their states.

More generally, it is not enough to sympathize and have "a feeling or emotion that responds to some apparent obstacle to an individual's good and involves concern for him, and thus for his welfare, for his sake" (Darwall, 2002, 67). This is because sympathy is too impoverished along two dimensions. First: one needs to do more than care only how a person's life goes for her sake to determine whether she can reach a basic minimum; one must understand her life. If we are evaluating the life of a parent who has lost a child, we must properly focus on the loss of the child, not on how bad the parent feels, to understand that loss in her life. Second: one should care about more than how a person's life goes *for her sake* (or even what is *choiceworthy* from her perspective) when reflecting on what she needs to live a minimally good life; one should care about a person *simpliciter*. To see both points, consider a slightly different case where the child is seriously ill. If one focuses on how the parent feels, one may try to help her in a variety of ways. It may be good for her to have a break from caring for her child. But if one focuses on the ill child and knows what it is like to be a parent, one may know that for that person to live even a minimally good life, she cannot give her child up. What she needs to get as close as possible to living a minimally good life, if the child's recovery is impossible, may be a lot of assistance in caring for her child.<sup>10</sup> If we focus on what the parent experiences, we can give her experiences due weight, but we

<sup>8</sup>Reasonable people must view other people as free and equal and consider what they would need to possess the moral powers, but caring people also understand that not everyone can or should try to secure these powers (Rawls, 1971; Kittay, 2005). Some people are not even capable of forming conceptions of the good and acting on them and reasonable caring people cannot ignore their existence (Rawls, 1971; Rawls, 1980). Rawls is probably right, however, to say reasonable people should not allow envy to affect their judgment and must be willing to tolerate diverse viewpoints and abide by the principles of justice they endorse.

<sup>9</sup>Darwall says sympathy "is a feeling or emotion that responds to some apparent obstacle to an individual's good and involves concern for him, and thus for his welfare, for his sake" (Darwall, 2002, 67).

<sup>10</sup>Kagan draws the boundaries between what is good for me and my life in this way – the experience machine affects my life but not me, the stranger affects neither (unless I invest time etc. in her success, in which case her welfare may affect the quality of my life) (Kagan, 1994). We might call the boundaries he draws on a life, life internalism and call those I propose life externalism (as even the stranger's success might count towards making my life good on the proposed account – though I think this is not likely to have much of an effect on my ability to reach a basic minimum). This opens the door to saying that many

should care about more than what is *good for* someone when considering what makes her life minimally good.<sup>11</sup>

### Arguing for justifiable care in practice

Consider why the proposed mechanism for figuring out what people need to live a minimally good life is likely to issue plausible results. If I empathize with other people in the appropriate way when considering what they need to live minimally good lives, and am free from coercion and constraint, I will set a standard for other people under which I would be content to live as they will. If I am reasonable (appropriately impartial), I will not set for other people a standard under which I would not be content to live as they will. If I am caring, I will set a standard that I believe is sufficient for other people with those people's interests. If I am free from coercion and constraint and appropriately empathetic and have all the relevant information, I will set a standard that is sufficient for other people with those interests.<sup>12</sup>

It is important that people employ the reasonable, caring, free standard because doing so is necessary to respect individuals' fundamental moral equality. This is most evident in the reasonableness requirement: in thinking about what people need to live minimally well (in the justifiable aspiration sense) we must be reasonable because respect for individuals' moral equality requires this kind of appropriate impartiality (Hassoun, 2018; Hassoun, 2020; Hassoun, forthcoming). But if we do not care for people as moral equals we may likewise fail to give their interests due weight – our equality is not merely formal but substantial. Moreover, I believe that our moral equality resides, at least in part, in our being free individuals who cannot be unjustifiably coerced or constrained (Locke, 1689; Hassoun, 2012; Hassoun, 2020; Hassoun, forthcoming). So, coercion and constraint should not determine what qualifies as a good enough life for free (equal) individuals.

Since they are committed to respecting individuals' moral equality, reasonable, caring, free people will be sensitive to the costs other people must bear of providing the standard they set, which is why reasonable people will be content with a *minimally good* (as opposed to extremely good or excellent) life. They might use a similar test to take the costs of provision into account, but the basic idea is just that they cannot make some slaves to others' less significant interests.<sup>13</sup> Reasonable people have different degrees of willingness to bear significant costs and, because we are free and independent

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strangers' success (a functioning economic system) may be something we owe people as a basic minimum, even if they do not know or care about those people's existence.

<sup>11</sup>Even if I am wrong about this, however, and we should employ Darwall's sympathetic concern instead, the other components of the account can remain intact.

<sup>12</sup>Of course, even a reasonable, free, caring person may make a mistake and set the standards too high or low. Deliberation with other reasonable, free, caring people can help ensure that the resulting standards are reasonable. Consider how a hedonist might insist that she would be perfectly content to live the life of a happy slave even if that person only values things on some objective list that they cannot secure while enslaved. One might object to the hedonist's conclusion in two ways on this account. First, one can say that the hedonist is being unreasonable in accepting adaptive preferences from an external perspective. Second, one can argue that they do not care enough about the person; empathy requires thinking about their values in deciding for them. Finally, note that the fact that the mechanism is intended to work in the real world (where people are not very good at giving others' interests equal consideration) also explains why people will have to be caring and take others' interests very seriously.

<sup>13</sup>We must give appropriate weight to individual freedom in considering what a minimally good life requires. Different theories of justice might result from different ways of thinking about this freedom.

individuals, what costs we should be willing to bear to help others live even minimally well is a matter of some debate – so I will not suppose reasonableness requires any strong form of outcome egalitarianism in what follows (Rosati 1995).<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, it is possible to specify (and limit) obligations to ensure people can live minimally good lives in a variety of ways. It may require vast resources to help people live minimally good lives on the proposed account (Fried, 1976), but helping people live minimally well may not always trump other things that matter. On some sufficiency theories, it is acceptable to help many people above the threshold rather than help one person below it while, on others, we can help many far below the threshold get closer before helping fewer people close to the threshold rise above it (Hassoun, 2009; Winderquist, 2010; Knight, 2015; Shields, 2018). Sufficiency theories need only claim that there is a shift in the reasons we have for helping people once they reach the threshold (and it is plausible that we have especially weighty reasons to respect, protect, and help everyone live at least minimally well) (Shields, 2018). Individuals can plausibly claim the proposed basic minimum when it is possible to help them live minimally good lives without violating other moral requirements even if ensuring that they can secure this much requires a lot (Segall, 2014; Nielsen, 2016).

People may use this article's mechanism to make moral progress in their particular (and limited) historical circumstances. It gives us some critical leverage on the limits we face, though sometimes there is no way someone can live a minimally good life in her world (though she should get as close as possible to living such a life). Because people can be more or less reasonable and caring or fail to freely occupy an appropriately impartial deliberative stance in a way that provides some space for reflection relatively free from framing effects, deliberation may be necessary to guard against unintentional biases and to figure out what is actually reasonable and caring in any particular case.<sup>15</sup>

To make the case that the minimally good life account can help guide action, consider how reasonable, caring, free people might reason about three concrete cases. Suppose that some such policymakers are considering what someone in the Limpopo province of South Africa needs to live minimally well. They consider the life of a typical child who is sometimes food insecure, lacks adequate water and sanitation, and is at significant risk of being unable to attain more than an elementary education (De Cock et al., 2013; OECD, 2019; South African Government, 2020). The child and her family members are also likely to die young of AIDS or violence (Africa Check, 2019; World Bank, 2019; Avert, 2020). Even if the child is currently healthy, she almost certainly lacks secure access to the institutions, resources, and capabilities she needs to live a minimally good life. Reflecting on what she needs to maintain decent relationships, pleasures, knowledge, appreciation, and worthwhile activities, etc. can guide policymakers in trying to improve her life prospects.

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Resolving differences between them will hinge on arguments for how we should more precisely understand people as free and equal (or what reasonable care requires).

<sup>14</sup>Connie Rosati argues that often welfarist theories employ unrealistically demanding forms of idealization. She suggests that full information views are not epistemically accessible, cannot help people choose, and cannot inform policy. However, thinking about what reasonable, caring, free people would say about different cases may help people think better about what lives are good enough; the mechanism provides a framework within which I hope we can make progress in considering what minimally good lives require.

<sup>15</sup>People's judgments are influenced by their current standing and values and there is no fully impartial perspective, but I do think we can often think well about whether or not we would now be content to live someone else's life (with their values and history etc.) and that this is how we should decide whether someone can secure a basic minimum.



Here is a harder case. Consider how a reasonable, caring, free person would evaluate the life of a fourteen-year-old Amish girl who loves her community and has been baptized into the Amish church, but decides she really wants to go to college. Even if the child is eventually able to flourish in the outside world, she may lose her community, which she values greatly. Since she will lack her family's support and information about the outside world, it will likely be hard for her leave. It may also be possible for her to successfully live within the Amish community but, fully understanding and empathizing with her, one could also see how this might be quite difficult. What can policy-makers do to help? Perhaps not much besides finding ways to make the transition to the outside world easier for the girl if she decides she wants to leave the community.

Finally, consider a single parent of three children who lives in Colorado, has minimal savings, and loses his job when he gets hit by a car, develops a serious heart condition, and can no longer work. Can that parent continue to live minimally well? Can his children? Arguably, the parent will be at high risk of losing access to the relationships, pleasures, knowledge, appreciation, and worthwhile activities that make his life minimally good, not only because his disease, and its treatment, cause significant pain and may kill him young, but also because our social safety net is woefully inadequate. Medicaid and ObamaCare may provide some relief from medical costs, but it may be hard for him to get access to housing, and other benefits, and his family may not qualify. Furthermore, if the parent cannot provide for his children, they may be taken into foster care – notorious in the United States for providing inconsistent care that can also threaten children's ability to live minimally well (Finkelstein et al., 2002; Wertheimer, 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

Understanding what it is like to live in a South African township, an Amish community, and as a poor sick person in Colorado is essential for resolving any disagreements about whether these people can live minimally well. I believe that if reasonable, caring, free people put themselves in the relevant other's shoes and consider what they would need to live minimally well *as that person*, they will think more clearly about what minimally good lives really require. Discussion and further inquiry into what it is really like to live as others do can help resolve remaining disagreements.

### The advantages of the account

The account sketched above fulfills the desiderata with which this article began. First, it provides a *minimal* standard; it lets us bracket many important disagreements about what social justice requires in providing a standard on which we can secure broad agreement. It does not require people to have everything that they might choose, for instance. On the account, people only need *an adequate range* of the things that let them live minimally good lives; they do not need everything from which they could benefit. People only require all the things that are necessary and important for living a minimally good life. Second, it provides a *sufficient* standard. It ensures that everyone can live a choiceworthy life and one in which they have enough of the things that make their lives good for them. The standard ensures that people can doubtlessly live well. To live a minimally good life, people need to function well and have some resources (as well as capabilities) even if they choose to sacrifice the things they have in order to secure other ends.

I believe this account provides a plausible basis for what we owe to other people as a basic minimum – though, again, it is only a useful tool for cashing out a theory of social justice and cannot on its own resolve any debates between these theories. Consider what

a theory on which we must only ensure everyone can live a minimally good life entails (just to illustrate one way the account may be used). On the one hand, this theory is not compatible with libertarianism or even pure luck egalitarianism, because the theory suggests we must help even the irresponsible live such lives, at least when it is not too costly.<sup>16</sup> However, it leaves a great deal of room for personal responsibility (and in some respects much more than, say, luck egalitarianism) (Fleurbaey, 1995; Fleurbaey, 2008). On the other hand, this theory does not permit us to enforce complete equality or even democratic socialism; as long as everyone can live a minimally good life, the affluent are free to devote the rest of their resources elsewhere.

Those who have different perspectives on personal responsibility, freedom, equality, and permissible paternalism that yield different theories of social justice, however, can also use this article's account of the minimally good life (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2015). Luck egalitarians and others who reject sufficiency theory might say we must only ensure people can live minimally good lives when they act responsibly, and insofar as doing so does not undermine individual freedom or require paternalism (Dworkin, 2000; Nussbaum, 2011). On the other hand, perhaps we must ensure that people live minimally good lives and provide them with much more (Arneson, 2006; Goodin, 2010).<sup>17</sup> Pluralist egalitarianism remains a promising possibility. It is also possible to introduce different thresholds to say, for instance, that we should help everyone live a minimally good life before helping other people secure more than this (Casal, 2007). This article has not attempted to resolve any of these debates but, rather, provides an account of the minimally good life that can play such roles.

However we resolve debates about exactly how a basic minimum should fit into an account of what we owe to other people, I believe this article's account of the minimally good life has some advantages over the other well-worked out accounts of what a basic minimum requires in the literature (Nussbaum, 2000; Dorsey, 2012; Sher, 2014; Liao 2015). I focus here only on three – Matthew Liao's account of the minimally good life, Martha Nussbaum's capability theory, and Dale Dorsey's proposal for a basic minimum. I will argue that these accounts fail to provide some of the things people plausibly need to secure a basic minimum (they are not sufficient) and, moreover, that Nussbaum's and Dorsey's require we provide people with things that most will agree they do not require to do so (so they are not minimal).

As Rowan Cruft helpfully summarizes Matthew Liao's view, it focuses on what "*human beings qua human beings* need in order to . . . pursue . . . *basic activities*" (Cruft, 2015, 103). These activities affect individuals' lives as a whole and improve the quality of our lives qua human beings – that is, they are things that typically improve humans' quality of life (Liao, 2015, 6). Some examples include "deep personal relationships with, e.g., one's partner, friends, parents, children; knowledge of, e.g., the workings of the world, of oneself, of others; active pleasures such as creative work and play; and passive pleasures such as appreciating beauty" (Liao, 2015, 7). One does not

<sup>16</sup>Some luck egalitarians introduce a basic minimum to avoid some problems with the view and may draw on this article's account.

<sup>17</sup>My view is compatible with Roger Crisp's (2003) view that we should give priority to those below the threshold at which compassion comes into play and perhaps allow utilitarianism above the threshold. But it is also compatible with other views of justice that include a threshold. We both rely on the idea of a somewhat impartial and compassionate spectator putting herself in others' shoes, but I restrict my view to human beings and think that the level of the threshold should be absolute (though, like absolute poverty levels, what is sufficient will depend on how society is organized etc.).

need virtue or excellence to live a (minimally) good life on Liao's account but requires "various goods, capacities, and options that human beings qua human beings need" (Liao, 2015, 8). Some of these fundamental conditions may only be necessary for securing some of the basic activities, but he specifies that everyone needs all of them. Moreover, Liao says people should have "an adequate range of fundamental goods, capacities and options so that they can pursue those basic activities that are characteristic of a minimally decent human life" (Liao, 2015, 8). He does not propose the reasonable, caring, free, person standard for figuring out what the minimally good life requires.

I reject the idea that people can secure the basic minimum because they have what people typically need for a good life on Liao's account if they need more to pursue basic activities and secure the other things that make their lives minimally good. Individuals may have idiosyncratic needs, for particular kinds of health care or social conditions.<sup>18</sup> Further, contra Liao, it is not enough if people are only able to *pursue* the things that make their lives minimally good (he does not take pursuit to require success) (Liao, 2015). People must be able to secure these things to have a basic minimum. Moreover, normally, people must find it easy enough to do so. Furthermore, we should care about much more than basic activities – though Liao says that these can include passive as well as active pleasures, good relationships, and knowledge (Liao, 2015). As capability theorists point out, we should care about what individuals can be as well as what they can do. Finally, some things contribute to individuals' ability to secure a basic minimum that do not, on their own, impact individuals' lives as wholes. Many small pleasures together can enhance life's quality even if none do so alone. While Liao and I probably agree about the first and second conditions in my account of a minimally good life, we disagree about the third through fifth.

Perhaps, however, it is better to say that people require basic capabilities to secure a basic minimum, rather than specifying that they can only do so when they have whatever will enable them to live minimally good lives? Note, first, that my account of the basic minimum is a capability theory if one specifies that people must only be *able* to live minimally good lives. One might argue that ensuring people actually live minimally good lives is too paternalistic; we must only ensure that people are capable of living such lives. Note, though, that even ensuring basic capabilities may be paternalistic; we may have to tax people to ensure that they secure these capabilities (Dorsey, 2012; Wolff and de-Shalit, 2013). Moreover, I believe we should sometimes help people live minimally well even when this requires providing for them things they could provide for themselves (were they making better choices), at least as long as they do not reject our help.

Be that as it may, however, I believe the minimally good life account has an advantage over at least the best-known capability theories because it better allows for individual differences and has a more expansive ground (Nussbaum, 2006; Venkatapuram, 2011; Ruger, 2016). For instance, Nussbaum says a "fully human" life must include sufficient sensation, imagination, emotion, thought, health, affiliation, play, bodily integrity, practical reason, connection with other species, and control over one's environment as well as life (Nussbaum, 2000, 71). Not everyone needs everything on this list to secure a basic minimum. Some people hate nature (and only desire to connect with animals and plants at meal times); many of these people can secure a basic minimum even if they are not capable of connecting with other species and even if they lack effective access to nature conceived more broadly. It is hard to see why

<sup>18</sup>If we, instead, understand what is good for people qua people in a substantive (as opposed to statistical) way, Liao owes us an account of human nature.

these people must have the opportunity to access nature if they do not value doing so at all and will never come to value nature. Others may need specific capabilities to secure a basic minimum that are not on Nussbaum's list. Some may require the capability to be a part of a particular religious community, for instance, and not just some kind of affiliation. So, Nussbaum and I disagree about what people need to live minimally well under (4) (and the conditions under (2) which I suggest go well beyond capabilities themselves).<sup>19</sup>

Alternately, consider Dale Dorsey's view in *The Basic Minimum: A Welfarist Approach*. Dorsey adopts a view much like the one Joseph Raz defends in *Morality as Freedom* (Raz, 1986, 308–09). On this account, to fare minimally well, people need success in valued projects. These projects are “global”; they are long-term goals that help unify people's lives (Dorsey, 2012, 39–41).<sup>20</sup> To avoid endorsing problematic adaptive preferences, Dorsey says we should make sure individuals would still endorse their projects if their preferences were coherent and complete (Dorsey, 2012, 89). This view is sensitive to differences between individuals in a way that Liao's view is not (Dorsey, 2012, 10). Different people have different values and can succeed in different projects. This is an advantage of Dorsey's account over Liao's and many other accounts of what we owe people as a basic minimum as well.

Still, we should reject Dorsey's view both because it does not guarantee enough for some and because it may provide other people with too much. Individuals' values (and life plans) matter, but they are not all that matter. It is not enough to help people satisfy complete coherent preferences that constitute unifying life plans on my account if, for instance, they completely and coherently adapt to a bad situation.<sup>21</sup> A horribly abused woman who only wants to live with her abuser does not plausibly live a minimally good life (even if she has completely and coherently adapted to her situation). Moreover, people in dire poverty do not live minimally good lives, though Dorsey's account wrongly suggests that they do as long as they can sustain and value their global, unifying projects (Dorsey, 2012). Even some of the sickest, poorest, and most disadvantaged among us

<sup>19</sup>Moreover, (and departing here from the strong anti-paternalist) I believe there are things beyond basic capabilities that we must help people secure for a basic minimum. In explaining what people need to live minimally good lives, I have tried to avoid saying anything anti-paternalists must reject. That is, I have only explained what people need to live minimally good lives and have said nothing about whether we must actually ensure people live such lives. But, ultimately, I believe that nudging is often acceptable because people must actually live such lives to have the basic minimum. I believe people must have some basic functionings as well as capabilities to reach the threshold even if they choose to sacrifice some such functionings to achieve something else of value (e.g., if they choose to – and we should let them – go on a prolonged hunger strike or commit suicide to bring about political change). Freedom from terrible pain is, for instance, plausibly necessary for a minimally good life in the justified aspiration sense even if one does not want to be free from such pain (Arneson, 2000). It is not enough if one is just able to avoid or alleviate the *pain*, though consent is still important for medical treatment (Cohen, 1989; Cohen, 1994; Arneson, 2000; Parfit, 2011). On traditional capability theories, people can have everything they are due without actually having anything of value besides the possibility of choice (they only need to be able to secure other valuable things) (Dorsey, 2012).

<sup>20</sup>Several other authors endorse something like Dorsey's view and these views often have similar problems. Consider, for instance, George Sher's view in *Equality for Inegalitarians*. Sher is concerned that people can set their own aims and pursue strategies for fulfilling them (Sher, 2014). However, a plausible basic minimum will have to provide some people with much more than this. When misfortune strikes, it is not enough to point out that those who are poor, sick, and miserable can still choose how they would like to live. Many views in the literature on sufficiency theory face similar problems (Nielsen, 2016; Shields, 2018).

<sup>21</sup>For the same reason it will not do to ground sufficiency in autonomy alone, although autonomy is plausibly part of its ground (Nielsen, 2016).

are able to fulfill their global unifying plans. Furthermore, Dorsey and I disagree about my condition (4). On my account, we much more plausibly have to provide the impoverished with the health care, education, food, water and shelter as well as opportunities and capabilities necessary to contentedly live life in their shoes. At the same time, we do not have to provide everyone with whatever they need to have the kind of unifying plan that Dorsey thinks the basic minimum requires if people can live minimally good lives without such plans. Suppose someone with very expensive tastes requires nearly the whole of their country's gross domestic product to achieve their life's goals. I do not think that means they should get such assistance at all, never mind as part of the basic minimum.

Consider a concrete example. In *Valuing Freedom*, Sabina Alkire describes an aid project to help poor villagers improve their livelihood. The aid agency presented two options: growing vegetables for export or roses to sell for decorating shrines. The women chose the roses because this option supported one of their valued life projects – it helped them honor their gods (Alkire, 2002). Alkire rightly believes that we should help people live lives they value. But, at the same time, this project's value went beyond giving the women meaningful work. It also helped them feed their families, send their children to school, secure basic health care, and so forth. Sometimes helping people honor their gods is a good way of helping them secure a basic minimum. Sometimes it is the only effective way of doing so. But, if the roses did not help the women improve their livelihoods, the women should still be able to secure adequate food, water, shelter, and so forth. We should help people live minimally good lives even if that does not help them carry out their life projects. What we owe people as a basic minimum should be sensitive to individuals' preferences in some ways but cannot be completely determined by them.

There are many other possible accounts of the basic minimum that might inform theories of what we owe to other people and I do not have the space here to consider other possibilities. Still, I have said enough to illustrate some common ways in which accounts can fail; few may be both minimal and sufficient.

## Conclusion

This article's account of the minimally good life provides a plausible standard for what we owe to other people as a basic minimum. The account has some advantages over the main alternatives. It plausibly provides a minimum sufficient for informing theories of human rights or global justice (Nussbaum, 2000; Nickel, 2007; Brock, 2009; Hassoun, 2013; Liao, 2015). Moreover, those with different perspectives on what we owe to other people can draw on the account. Individuals' claims might be limited, for instance, if their demands are so onerous that something more morally significant will be lost in the process. Still, providing a plausible minimal standard is very important. Understanding what we owe people as a basic minimum may help guide efforts, and shape policies, to better fulfill everyone's claims. As researchers articulate substantive standards for a basic minimum using the mechanism the account provides, it can open the door to new empirical work on the factors that contribute to minimally good lives and how this conception relates to other accounts of good lives, well-being, and happiness (Graham, 2009; Kahneman and Deaton, 2010).<sup>22</sup> Together this work may

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<sup>22</sup>To arrive at concrete measurable indicators for a particular purpose it may suffice to ask people what kinds of lives in general they would be content to live. To improve the measure's accuracy, researchers may

help us design institutions and policies that better enable people to live minimally good lives.<sup>23</sup>

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have to ask people to consider whether a broader range of different lives might qualify as minimally good. As formulated the methodology proposed here may be most useful for policymakers and bureaucrats trying to ensure that they are appropriately caring and impartial by encouraging them to consider all of their constituents' interests or, when facing particular individuals with complaints, considering their justification.

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