The Social Minimum as a Distributive Concern[1]

El mínimo social como cuestión distributiva

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Abstract: The moral, legal, and political assessment and categorization of the provision of a social minimum is controversial because it borders on being an essentially contested concept from at least four distinct perspectives through which political economic activity is evaluated: the market viewpoint (commutative perspective), the labor and production viewpoint (contributive perspective), the public institution viewpoint (distributive perspective), and the unproductive expenditure or complementary consumption viewpoint (donative perspective). This paper will focus on the viewpoint of public institutions responsible for determining what constitutes a socially just distribution of a social minimum. To accomplish this, it will outline a conceptual framework in which the distribution of a social minimum can

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be meaningfully debated in conceptually transparent terms. The hypothesis behind building this platform is that understanding the social minimum as a *distribuendum* should be based on an understanding of distributable goods as a valuable kind of resource, whether material or immaterial. Accordingly, the paper will outline the conceptual variations of a resource-oriented understanding of the social minimum as a requirement of distributive justice.
Keywords: social minimum; distributive justice; resource; sufficiency; equality.

Resumen: La evaluación y categorización moral, jurídica y política de la provisión de un mínimo social es controvertida porque roza lo esencialmente controvertido desde al menos cuatro perspectivas distintas a través de las cuales se evalúa la actividad económica política: el punto de vista del mercado (perspectiva conmutativa), el punto de vista del trabajo y la producción (perspectiva contributiva), el punto de vista de las instituciones públicas (perspectiva distributiva) y el punto de vista del gasto improductivo o consumo complementario (perspectiva donativa). Este artículo se centrará en el punto de vista de las instituciones públicas responsables de determinar qué constituye una distribución socialmente justa del mínimo social. Para ello, esbozará un marco conceptual en el que la distribución del mínimo social pueda debatirse de manera significativa, en términos conceptualmente transparentes. La hipótesis en la que se basa esta perspectiva es que el mínimo social debe comprenderse como *distribuendum* en la medida en que los bienes distribuibles se conciben como un recurso valioso, ya sea material o inmaterial. En consecuencia, el artículo esbozará las variaciones conceptuales de la comprensión del mínimo social como un recurso que sirve de base para la justicia distributiva.
Palabras clave: mínimo social; justicia distributiva; recurso; suficiencia; igualdad.

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Sumario: I. Introduction. II. "Thick" Social Minima. III. Basic Equality and Minimal Sufficiency. IV. Action-Oriented and Outcome-Oriented Minima. V. Conclusion. VI. Bibliography.

I. Introduction

The concept of the social minimum occupies a central, yet frequently underexamined, place in contemporary debates on distributive justice. At its most general, it refers to the set of goods, resources, or opportunities that must be secured for members of a political community in order for them to lead a minimally decent life. The social minimum is not merely a policy instrument; it is a normative benchmark that shapes how societies conceptualize membership, rights, and obligations within conditions of interdependence. Despite its apparent simplicity, the notion resists straightforward definition. Competing theoretical frameworks have articulated the minimum in divergent ways, giving rise to tensions about its content, justification, and mode of distribution.

By competing conceptions of the social minimum, I mean the variety of philosophical attempts to define what constitutes a just distribution of the minimal bundle of goods necessary for dignity and inclusion. Some approaches treat the minimum primarily as a matter of civic obligation, others as a question of access to public or common goods, and still others as an outcome-based threshold of sufficiency. The diversity of interpretations underscores the difficulty of assuming any widely acceptable, let alone universal, definition of the term.

This conceptual difficulty arises from at least three interrelated sources. First, the social character of the minimum is not self-explanatory. To qualify the minimum as "civic," "public," or "communal" is not to paraphrase but to reorient the debate toward distinct normative traditions — civic reciprocity, public goods provision, or collective resource management. These "thicker" interpretations often pull the discussion into neighboring domains, such

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as theories of solidarity, common ownership, or the common good, which, while relevant, are not reducible to the distributive problem itself. Second, the minimal character of the bundle is easily conflated with its basicness. Yet the two attributes point to distinct normative standards: "minimum" typically encodes a sufficientarian concern with thresholds of adequacy, while "basic" often signals an egalitarian concern with equal standing. These differences track deeper disagreements between sufficiency- and equality-based models of justice. Third, the individuation of distributive standards depends on whether we interpret them in terms of actions or outcomes. Action-oriented accounts emphasize the justice of agents' conduct — what is owed or not owed through reciprocal obligations or non-interference — while outcome-oriented accounts focus on distributive states of affairs, such as levels of welfare, capabilities, or resources achieved. Each approach yields a different understanding of what makes the minimum morally binding.

Taken together, these difficulties reveal that the social minimum is not a fixed category but a site of conceptual contestation. The purpose of this essay is to map this contested terrain by clarifying the conceptual issues that underlie competing accounts. The analysis proceeds along three axes:

1) How do "thick" conceptions of the social minimum — grounded in civic duty, public goods, and principles of the common good — differ, and what normative implications follow from their divergence?
2) Why should we resist conflating "minimum" standards of distribution with "basic" ones, and what does this distinction reveal about sufficientarian and egalitarian models of justice?
3) What is at stake in distinguishing action-oriented from outcome-oriented accounts of distributive minima, and how does this distinction shape our understanding of what is minimally owed in justice?

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By pursuing these questions, the essay seeks not to settle the definition of the social minimum but to illuminate its plural conceptual foundations. Such an inquiry is crucial, for the manner in which a society interprets its social minimum not only shapes distributive policy but also reflects deeper commitments about citizenship, solidarity, and the very terms of political membership.

II. "Thick" Social Minima

Words that qualify as nearly or purely transcendental, such as "true," "good," "one," "right," "social," "private," and "legal," have meanings, histories, and uses. In principle, there is nothing objectionable about allowing some laxity when choosing their complements. As long as the topic of discussion or investigation is not directly about their semantic or pragmatic features, the question of how we intend to understand their qualifying role with respect to complements such as governance, property, and freedom remains open. However, as often happens when the context of a specific inquiry is highly abstract, the complements take on bizarre, exotic, or controversial qualities. Consequently, users find it more difficult to consider accepting or at least tolerating radical proposals about their proper use. In the present case, attributes such as "social", "civic", "public", and "common" have been used at different frequencies and levels of abstraction to qualify the substantivized noun "minimum". As I will argue, these uses are not interchangeable.

1. *The Civic Minimum*

Consider, for example, appeals to the existence and necessity of a civic minimum. Stuart White's monograph *The Civic Minimum* is perhaps the best example of how qualifying the minimum in civic terms can steer the discussion in a distinct direction. In his words, the civic minimum refers to 'the concrete rights and obligations of economic

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citizenship, embodied in specific institutions and policies, necessary to make a market economy acceptably (though not absolutely) just' (White, 2003, p. 3). At the heart of his argument is the notion of justice as fair reciprocity. This is grounded in a philosophy of economic citizenship according to which citizens 'have definite, potentially enforceable obligations to make a productive contribution to the community. These obligations, however, arise only in a society that offers all its citizens "a sufficiently generous share of the social product.' (White, 2003, p. 17). More specifically, White argues that the institutions that govern economic life must be structured so as to satisfy a number of core commitments. These include the elimination of brute luck poverty, adequate protection against market vulnerability, the reduction of inequalities of opportunity, and protection against discrimination (White, 2003, p. 90). In the absence of such institutions and policies, those who are unjustly disadvantaged by this have a proportionately reduced obligation to contribute'. (White, 2003, p. 91).

In which sense is White's "civic minimum" a "thicker", distinct conception of the "social minimum"? For White as well as for his philosophical precursor, T.H. Marshall, social rights are ultimately an enablement to the practice of citizenship, not vice versa.[2] This practically means that the acquisition of certain rights including the right to a social minimum is strictly accompanied by a bundle of civic responsibilities "particularly in the case of those receiving some form of special assistance from the state". (White, 2003, p. 14). Being conscientiously attentive to these responsibilities is a way of reciprocating the enjoyment of social rights, hence the justice involved in this sort of normative exchange is neither purely distributive nor purely contributive or productive but a civic hybrid thereof.

[2] Although White also asserts that social rights are 'instrumental to an ultimate distributive goal that is radically egalitarian' (White, 2003, p. 18), the radical character of this egalitarian vision cannot be defined independently of the equally radical character of responsibilities of economic citizenship which are strictly reciprocal to the enjoyment of social rights.

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How is this shoddy attempt at exegesis relevant for our discussion? In default of a more eloquent way to show how the qualification of the minimum as *primarily* civic matters for our understanding of the competing political visions, I will avail myself of George Armstrong Kelly's way of expressing his reservation about T.H. Marshall's civic vision of social rights. In Kelly's words:

> Does the receipt of a right especially in the redistributive welfare sense actually activate or redefine the scope of citizenship? For Marshall, "the right to share to the full in the social heritage" evidently assumes that the rights-holder will make a contribution to that heritage. But is this necessarily true? Marshall speaks of "a direct sense of community membership based on a loyalty to a civilization which is a common possession ... a loyalty of free men endowed with rights and protected by a common law." If this is so, what is that sense of civilization? Or is it instead possible that the acquisition of social rights can promote what Habermas calls "civil privatism," …With the swelling of bureaucracies, might this not encourage a new category of "negative citizenship," that is, persons tied to the state for their livelihood and protection, in the manner of clients, but basically uninvolved in public issues and public business? (Kelly, 1979, p. 32).

The first step is to recognize the distinction that Kelly wants to maintain between the civic and *civil* dimensions of citizenship. Civic behavior is typically driven by a sense of civic duty that is not tied to a civic right. In contrast, a *civil* duty to respect another person's status as free and equal is related to a civil right, such as the right to free speech or the right to exclusive use of one's property. Civic behavior responds to entitlements bestowed by community membership. Conversely, civil behavior recognizes each person as a potential participant in an interpersonal relationship of mutual respect and recognition. The distinction between reciprocating a collectively enabled benefit and respecting an individual right is significant. This distinction helps us understand how social rights and a social minimum can align with both a civic and a civil conception of citizenship. In the former case, a social minimum aligns with

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the civic duty of reciprocity. However, in the latter case, enjoyment of a social minimum is not tied to the demands of active or "patriotic" citizenship.

2. *Variants of an Economic Minimum*

Another concern is that the concept of minimum social protection varies depending on the type of economic model that could lead to the legal establishment of a social minimum. Those familiar with the vocabulary of public economics will easily recognize the distinct flavor of appeals to public and common economic goods.[3] Adding the qualifier "economic" to "good" has an important connotation: it shifts the context of the discourse from scenarios of abundance or sufficiency to scenarios of scarcity in the production and availability of goods.[4] In other words, extra effort, exertion, and expenditure—both individual and collective—are required to obtain economic commodities. Furthermore, the economic definition of a public good has little to do with whether these goods are provided by public institutions or private enterprises, and much to do with certain abstract features that many goods share. However, not all of these features are regularly made available by public means. These features depend on technology, values, and tastes, which makes the boundaries contested and shifting over time (Reiss, 2021).

One preliminary consideration is how an economic understanding of publicity and commonality may affect the social nature

[3] It bears noting that "public" and "common" also have salient *political* connotations. Public institutions are not public in the same sense that national defense is a public economic good—i.e., every resident in a state can benefit from the provision of conditions of national security regardless of whether she pays taxes. In the context of my concern about the conceptual preliminaries to a foundational understanding of the social minimum I will only focus on the economic significations of "public" and "common". Whenever context invites a switch in the interpretation of these qualifiers from economic to political I will make specific mention of the meaning conveyed by their use.

[4] According to Elizabeth Anderson, a good is an economic good if its production, distribution, and enjoyment are properly governed by market norms—see Anderson (1993, p. 146).

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we attribute to the concept of a minimum bundle of goods and/or services. In economics, goods, services, and resources are assigned two fundamental dimensions of importance: excludability and rivalry. Excludability is defined as the extent to which a good, service, or resource can be restricted to paying customers or restricted by a supplier, producer, or managing body (e.g., a government). Public economic goods are defined as non-excludable and non-rivalrous, while common goods are defined as non-excludable but rivalrous.[5]

A couple of examples will help us appreciate the scope of influence of this distinction. We begin with the notion of a public good. Goods as disparate as knowledge, free-to-air television, air, national defense or free and open-source software are economically public in the joint sense that, firstly, to use the words of the economist usually credited for articulating the modern theory of public goods, 'each individual's consumption of such a good leads to no subtractions from any other individual's consumption of that good' (Samuelson, 1954, p. 387)[6] and, secondly, anyone in society benefits from their provision or availability whether they pay taxes or not. Once these goods are produced or become available, they are available

[5] I will suppress the complexity that arises as soon as we include in our analysis borderline, secondary or hybrid cases of economic goods such as impure public or toll-like goods which satisfy the conditions of non-excludability and non-rivalry only to a certain degree. Examples of such goods include public education, public health care, parks and recreational facilities, police and fire protection, and, public transit systems roads and bridges. Consumption of one of these goods by another person diminishes, but does not eliminate, the benefits that other people receive from their consumption of the same good. Access to many recreational facilities is controlled, and toll roads and toll bridges are not unfamiliar. Fire and police protection are more problematic. Controlling access to these services is more difficult, and even if it were feasible, it would raise serious ethical questions. Toll-like goods are non-rivalrous for those having paid the 'toll' and keeping the toll low artificially is usually sufficient for preventing a good from becoming an exclusionary good. The possibility of controlling access to impure public goods has two important implications. First, provision by private firms or by governments on a "fee for service" basis becomes possible, because free riding can be eliminated. Second, the provider of the good can influence the degree of congestion in the conditions of its consumption by regulating either the number of people who use the good, or the frequency with which they use the good, or both.

[6] An important caveat that reiterates the economic construal of this concept is that public goods are not necessarily goods provided by the public sector. Although it is often the case that government is involved in producing public goods, this is not always true. Public goods may be naturally available, or they may be produced by private individuals, by firms, or by non-state groups engaging in some form of collectively upheld production.

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to each person rather than to a predetermined group of persons. Take, for instance, the case of knowledge. Once a fact or method becomes epistemically accessible, that knowledge can be used by anyone, and its use by any one person does not preclude its use by others. To borrow an instructive example from John Leach, 'our use of calculus to study economics does not prevent millions of other people from simultaneously applying calculus to entirely different problems in industry and science.' (Leach, 2014, p. 171).

By sharp contrast, natural or man-made resource systems such as fishing grounds, groundwater basins, grazing areas, irrigation canals, bridges, parking garages, mainframe computers, and streams, lakes, oceans, and other bodies of water are not public but common or common-pool, as the economic parlance goes, in the economically qualified sense that, even though their size, characteristics or public ownership status[7] make it costly (but not impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from their use, their continuous exploitation is subject to harvesting constraints. Certain conditions must be met for the resource cores of these goods to produce a maximum quantity of extractable units— e.g., the tons of fish harvested from a fishing ground, the cubic meters of water withdrawn from a groundwater basin or an irrigation canal, the tons of fodder consumed by animals from a grazing area, the number of bridge crossings used per year by a bridge, the parking spaces filled or the quantity of biological waste absorbed per year by a stream or other waterway—*without devaluing or depleting the resource system itself*.

Such rivalrous scenarios give rise to what the American ecologist Garrett Hardin (1968) famously called "the tragedy of the commons." His favorite illustration features ranchers grazing their animals on a common field (the common-pool resource). When the field is not over capacity, ranchers can graze their animals with few limitations. However, a profit-motivated rancher will seek to add

[7] For example, a constitutional provision might explicitly provide unlimited access to the fisheries within a jurisdiction to all citizens of that jurisdiction.

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more livestock. This individualistic reasoning allows the rancher to reap the benefits of adding animals while sharing the costs. Ultimately, overconsumption will prevent any rancher from grazing the field.

Are these economic distinctions relevant to our discussion about implementing a social minimum? I think so, insofar as they eliminate a possible source of misunderstanding. Both pure public goods and common economic goods are non-excludable, meaning it is not physically or practically possible to prevent people from benefiting from them. Someone unfamiliar with public economics and social policy might unduly conflate the physical or practical non-excludability of these goods with the legally unconditional universality of social minimum implementation schemes, such as universal basic income policies. These policies aim to enact a social minimum by providing regular payments of unconditional, non-withdrawable income to individuals based on their legal residence in a country. Basic income schemes differ from existing state-supported cash transfer mechanisms in that they are universally and unconditionally accessible. They require no eligibility criteria other than proof of residence. However, there is no conceptual or policy barrier to paying a basic income exceeding or falling below a minimum subsistence level.[8]

Leaving aside the thorny question of whether *money* can itself be classified as an economic good (Zelmanovitz, 2016, pp. 239-40), the point that matters more in this context is that the "nonexcludable" access to this regular income is by *institutional fiat* rather than by market or natural forces. Nothing normatively or ontologically intrinsic about the social minimum precludes the possibility of imposing principled or reasonable restrictions on its accessibility. There is nothing *economically* public in the social benefit obtained by UBI recipients. Accordingly, there are at least two ways in which these

[8] To engage in this debate would involve analyzing the derivation of official poverty lines and discussing how the level of basic income would respond to relative differences in costs of living. See Purdy (1994).

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economic categories matter for discussions about the implementation of a social minimum.

First, once we acknowledge the potential conflict between public economic goods and income-based methods of providing a social minimum, an alternative approach becomes apparent: a universal basic income (UBI) program. A UBI provides cash so that people can purchase goods and services to satisfy their needs. Since a UBI focuses on consumption rather than production, it does not significantly conflict with a program of radically expanded public service provision. However, what it is more concerning is that a UBI could crowd out the public provision of these goods by creating conditions that encourage replacing welfare state institutions with private provision. Assuming a universal basic income (UBI) favors market provision, left-leaning critics argue that improving livelihoods by providing free transportation, childcare, internet access, and housing would be more efficient and have a longer-lasting impact than distributing cash (Stirling, 2019).

The second way in which discussions of public goods in normative economics and political philosophy are relevant to discussions of the social minimum is more direct. These discussions include proposals that treat the provision of certain public goods as the objective of a universal basic services (UBS) policy. UBS is broadly defined as a type of public service that aims to provide "sufficient, freely accessible public services that can be afforded through reasonable income taxes to enable every citizen's safety, opportunity, and participation" (Leff, Percy, Story, & Szlinder, 2019, p. 220). UBS schemes provide free services at the point of use. In other words, users do not pay a portion of the service fee, or co-payment. Public social services, such as the United Kingdom's National Health Service, currently implement this policy, meaning services can be used free of charge. One subset of UBS schemes focuses directly on public goods, which are conveniently lumped together under public infrastructure. In this type of UBS, the state ensures universal access to public goods such as parks, forests, community spaces, information centers, and repair venues where people can gather and repair

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their utensils or clothing.[9] When it comes to sustainable welfare, the production of new forms of public infrastructure is a crucial task, and domains such as transportation, housing, and green infrastructure may be included as a part of it.

III. Basic Equality and Minimal Sufficiency

If these thicker accounts complicate the social dimension of the minimum, a second challenge emerges from the attempt to distinguish what is minimum from what is basic. This distinction, while subtle, carries significant normative consequences for theories of social distributive justice. I confess that I am having difficulty identifying a quasi-universal criterion that can explain variations in the meaning of these terms in a principled rather than insular way. While no one would deny that these terms could be used interchangeably or in combination as pleonastic markers in a policy-neutral context, this is unlikely to remain the case in discussions about distributing social goods.

The problem arises when we attempt to define the concept or value that we subsequently seek to implement through specific policies. The "social minimum" is an expression that has remained fixed across different social policy approaches and scholarly publications for quite some time. Without introducing unnecessary semantic complexity, I tentatively suggest that, despite their sporadic co-occurrence in the nominal construction "basic minimum," the terms "basic" and "minimum" point toward *distinct* visions of social assistance, protection, or welfare. Each type of vision is amenable to two interpretations: one normative and one ontological. Accordingly, if my conceptual demarcation is sound, we must grapple with at least four competing variants of social distribution.

[9] There are differences pertaining to the point at which universality and unconditionality occur within UBI and UBS. UBI is universal and unconditionally pays cash to all individuals, while UBS is a service used only when there is a specific need. In other words, the universal approach of UBS is only activated in response to need, while UBI preempts need.

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In this section, I will explore the normative implications of the terms "basic" and "minimum" in various scholarly and policy contexts. More precisely, I will ascribe to *normative basicalists* the position that discussions about enacting a social minimum should be driven by considerations of *equality*, and to *normative minimalists*, the position that such discussions should be driven by considerations of *sufficiency*. Egalitarians argue that inequality amounts to a failure to meet the proper standard of distributive justice (equality). For sufficientarians, what matters from the standpoint of justice is that people have enough.

Strictly egalitarian accounts of basic social distribution are based on the principle of equality. When applied to distributive problems, this principle stipulates that everyone should have an equal amount of material goods and services. This principle stems from the belief that people are morally equal and should treat each other and their political institutions accordingly. Thus, basic equality in material goods and services is considered the best way to realize this moral ideal. Policies such as universal basic income (UBI) programs aim to achieve this ideal by providing every individual with unconditional, regular, automatic, and non-withdrawable income.

In contrast, normative conceptions of a minimum degree of social protection aim to combat extreme poverty and exclusion from work by ensuring a minimum level of social provision sufficient for a minimally decent life. Transfers of resources from those who are better off to those who are worse off can be justified when such transfers increase the total number of people who achieve sufficiency.[10] The core normative commitment of sufficientarian views is that

[10] If there is a motto that best captures the application of the principle of sufficiency to distributive justice is that *enough* is *enough*. A robust feature of sufficientarian approaches to distributive justice, including social minimum provisions, is that trivial benefits for those who are well-off should never be preferred to a significant benefit for those who are badly-off, no matter the size of the groups involved. Karl Widerquist finds this aspect normatively alarming especially if it is taken to drive a social minimum policy scheme. In his words, 'in a world where there are rare diseases and hard-to-prevent accidents that cause people to fall below the sufficiency threshold, all of our discretionary spending will have to be devoted to bringing harder and harder cases up to sufficiency. Nothing will be left for anyone to consume above the sufficiency level' (Widerquist, 2010, p. 474).

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it is bad for a person to be insufficiently well off. The farther a person is from a sufficient level, especially if their basic needs are unmet, the worse they are. The worse off people are the more people there are who are not sufficiently well off. Therefore, it seems intuitive to apply this principle to advocate for a social minimum, as the worst possible collective state of affairs is when people lack basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter. These necessities operate as a minimal, sufficient threshold. Any descent below this threshold is morally more alarming than any instance of insufficiency above it. In other words, this approach uses the concept of a social minimum to represent a minimum degree of sufficiency.[11]

The preceding description of the context of appeals to a basic level or, conversely, minimal degrees of livelihood in a society makes it easier to appreciate the dimension along which these two variants of social distribution compete. The difference between basicness-driven (moral equality) and minimality-driven (sufficiency) visions of social protection lies in the nature of the *normative standards* that mandate the enactment, implementation and enforcement of a certain distributional pattern. By normative standards I mean the justifying principles or values that specify the *ideal* to which a particular distributive scheme answers: equalization of means for achieving equal moral standing, and adequation of living conditions in the case of sufficiency-oriented policies which aim at blocking descent below a threshold that marks the minimum required for a decent (good enough) quality of life.

Moreover, it bears noting that this normative disagreement about the standards or ideals of distribution between egalitarian

[11] This is not to say that sufficiency views reject the establishment of maximal—beyond the social minimum—sufficiency thresholds that may accrue by factoring in our welfare evaluations the subjective valuations of beneficiaries. Robert Huseby affirms this possibility noting that 'the maximal sufficiency threshold equals a level of welfare with which a person is content. Content here means not the absence of any desire to further improve one's lot, but rather satisfaction with the overall quality of one's life. This threshold-definition relies on the psychological assumption that people can indeed be content without having all their preferences met, and even that they can be content while not having some of their important preferences met.' (Huseby, 2010, p. 181).

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(basicness-oriented) and sufficientarian (minimality-oriented) approaches to social protection need not migrate to the level of what the actual object of distribution is or amounts to. This is a question about the nature of social *distribuenda*, not the standards of their distribution. In principle, both an egalitarian and sufficientarian approach to social distribution may—more often than not—take the same kinds of thing to be what we care about in advocating for a certain social policy scheme of distribution. These *aequanda* (equality) or *adaequanda* (sufficiency) may include indices that resemble the Rawlsian "primary goods"[12] such as the social bases of self-respect, expectations for life trajectories, opportunity for positions that confer special advantages (e.g., slots in colleges, universities, competitive private schools or other skill-formation institutions or public sector jobs) and basic liberties, or other goods such as income, wealth, health care or (opportunity for) relationships. Crucially, these are goods that are particular enough—means-oriented—that they are less frequently the object of direct disagreement.

IV. Action-Oriented and Outcome-Oriented Minima

Clarifying the distinction between "minimum" and "basic" reveals the fault line between sufficientarian and egalitarian principles. Yet another layer of complexity arises when we shift focus from the content of distributive standards to the *ontological basis* of justice itself: whether the minimum should be understood in terms of the blamelessness of actions that affect accessibility to a minimum bundle of resources or, conversely, in terms of the acceptability of the periodic outcomes of processes of social distribution.

More precisely, I will ascribe to *ontological basicalists* the position that talk of a social minimum refers to facts about basic social

[12] In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls describes primary goods as "things every rational man is presumed to want whatever else he wants" (Rawls, 1999, p. 79).

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actions or concessions—those that exactly satisfy the requirements of justice, solidarity, real freedom, or any other source. Anything beyond these required actions or concessions will be considered socially supererogatory. Supererogation is the technical term for the class of actions that go "beyond the call of duty."[13] Roughly speaking, supererogatory acts are morally good although not (strictly) required. Although common discourse in most cultures allows for such acts and often attaches special value to them, ethical theories have only rarely discussed this category of actions directly and systematically.

Conversely, I will ascribe to *ontological minimalists* the position that talk of social minimum tracks facts about socially minimal outcomes, or as the metaphysical parlance goes, states of affairs. On this approach, the social minimum will be an absolute or non-comparative state of affairs featuring the living conditions of individuals in a society— whether a welfare achievement or some level of resources or capabilities (e.g., the avoidance of starvation)—that, should anyone fall below it, social institutions will count as having have failed. Examples of such non-comparative states of affairs include locutions like "maintaining one's basic needs," or "possessing capabilities x, y, and z".

Let us begin by examining each conception separately. What does it mean to say that distributions, whether generous or miserly, should be identified as a type of action? The main motivation behind this understanding of distributive eventualities is the role that individual or collective agents play in distributive justice. More precisely, no distribution can be evaluated based on a defensible theory of justice without considering those *responsible* for its relevant distributive effects. These choices can be individual or collective, depending on how stratified one's social ontology is. In any case, determining an individual's or group's *responsibility for their actions* involves attributing certain powers and capacities to them. It also involves considering their actions as the result of how they have cho-

[13] For a thorough analysis see, among others, Heyd (2019).

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sen to exercise their powers and capacities. In other words, actions that can be attributed to an individual or group count as exercises of a particular set of capacities and powers within a specific theory of agency. Similarly, holding an individual or group responsible requires displaying attitudes toward them that are considered appropriate based on the judgment that they are responsible. Regardless of their manifestation, attitudinal responses always involve an element of praise or blame, whether moral or institutional. Blame is an appropriate response when one's actions are wrongful or harmful, while praise is an appropriate response when one's actions are righteous or beneficial.

How can a responsibility-driven understanding of actions with distributive impact be applied to actual problems of social distributive justice? To understand how such a conception would operate, we must make certain assumptions about the political vision or ideology that could inform it. A theory that aptly applies to an agent-based understanding of distribution is libertarian in a broad sense.[14] Broadly speaking, libertarianism as a moral and political theory has two fundamental principles: a theory of ownership and a theory of freedom. The former is largely understood through the idea that individuals have complete ownership of themselves. Self-ownership implies that self-owning individuals have the moral right to acquire property rights in external objects. This marks the transition from a theory of self-ownership to a theory of entitlement. The latter prong is a negative theory of freedom, or freedom from compulsion or coercion ("*libertas a coactione*"). This theory posits that each person has a right to maximum equal negative liberty, which is defined as the absence of forcible interference from others. One consequence of this second prong is that individuals are responsible for how their actions impact the freedom of oth-

[14] In his 1960 work, *The Constitution of Liberty*, Friedrich Hayek asserted that '[l[iberty not only means that the individual has both the opportunity and the burden of choice; it also means that he must bear the consequences of his actions and will receive praise or blame for them. Liberty and responsibility are inseparable. A free society will not function or maintain itself unless its members regard it as right that each individual occupy the position that results from his action and accept it as due to his own action.' (Hayek, 2011, p. 133).

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ers.[15] As we will see, unilateral choices can have a significant impact on freedom, raising legitimate concerns about the social minimum.

What follows is an application of a combined understanding of the two branches of libertarian thought. The goal is to demonstrate how they can provide a refined, action-based understanding of basic social protection. To this end, I will use an argument from Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974), focusing on the distributive relevance of interactions between private individuals engaging in title-conferring actions. Rather than replicating Nozick's argument, I will restate it for my purposes. More precisely, I will present a variation of his famous argument of historical entitlement and contend that existing holdings are *blamelessly*—rather than justly, as Nozick would assert—possessed if they result from an initial acquisition act, one or more transfer acts, or an act that rectifies a seizure of a holding—all of which are without blame.

In this modified version of Nozick's idea, injustice in holdings is a property of acts or private interactions with imputable distributive effects. Such acts or interactions raise issues of injustice *only if* imputing them to particular agents involves ascribing blame. One need not take this to be a reductive definition of justice as blameless agency. It is sufficient to assume that when one exercises her agency in a blameless manner, no issues of injustice arise. There is merely a negative correlation between the ascription of blame and the commission of injustice. According to this approach, any action that does not interfere with someone else's free agency should not be examined for its distributive effects because no injustice has occurred. Conversely, actions that curtail freedom and have distributive impacts should be scrutinized from the viewpoint of distributive justice. Blame and forcible interference with someone else's free agency go hand in hand.

[15] These two prongs and their entailments are not parallel theses. As Stephen Perry aptly, remarks, '[w]hether or not libertarianism is in the end a philosophically defensible theory, there is an underlying unity to these two strands in libertarian thought that is worth making clear. The basis of this unity is the idea that people "own" the effects, both good and bad, that causally flow from their actions' (Perry, 1997, p. 352).

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Accordingly—and this is the crucial step for broadening the scope of the argument—the conditions for holding the state responsible for its actions, including its welfare policies, must be the same as the conditions for holding two private parties—whether individuals or corporations—responsible for engaging in title-conferring actions. Interactions between the state and individuals involving or resulting in the conferral of entitlements to goods or services will be modeled exactly like ordinary interpersonal transactions. Such conferrals will be blameless and, therefore, unamenable to inspection for the "propriety" of their distributive impact. Setting aside the fact that Nozick never definitively states the types of initial acquisition, transfer, or rectification that generate or convey entitlements, we can assume that actions evaluable for distributive injustice are those attributable to the state, either individually or collectively. Any outcomes causally connected with blameless or freedom-upholding actions are not distributively relevant, regardless of their eventual effect on the allocation of goods among a society's members.

Taking this approach to answer the question of how to provide a minimum of social protection carries a sense of normative stringency that significantly constrains our imagination of a libertarian, minimally just society. Assuming the initial appropriation of a resource is possible and significant, as most libertarians do, we can identify a class of actions as the means by which an unowned resource becomes one's private property. This allows us to discuss actions—and not states of affairs—that are basic in the requisite sense because they exactly or minimally satisfy the requirements stipulated by justice, solidarity, libertarian freedom, real freedom, or any other source regarding what we owe each other as autonomous members of a society. To understand the acquisition of ownership of previously unowned resources as socially basic in this sense, we must add a normative criterion to the conditions used to identify this type of appropriation. This criterion must be satisfied alongside the descriptive criterion of exercising one's self-owned powers to bring a resource or object under one's possession and control.

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In other words, construing owning the unowned in purely descriptive terms will not suffice. A further criterion must be met to make this act of owning normatively felicitous.

The criterion that makes this act-individuation available is often referred as the *Lockean Proviso*.[16] This proviso—modeled after John Locke's description of the initial situation of his social contract—holds that appropriating acts of previously unowned resources are blameless—hence, the normative criterion for their individuation as acts of coming to own the previously unowned—if "enough and as good" be left for others. In other words, only if no one is thereby made worse off than they would be in a world where all external resources remained unowned, does the act of seizing an object or resource *count as* coming to own the previously unowned. It is precisely the "count-as" locution that conveys that acts of original acquisition cannot be individuated in purely descriptive terms.[17] Their criteria of individuation are at the same time conditions of normative felicity, so to speak. Something about their normative properties must be stipulated or presupposed in order for the "blameless" chain of successive acquisitions, transfers and rectifica-

[16] In John Locke's own words:

Nor was this *appropriation* of any parcel of *land*, by improving it, any prejudice to any other man, since there was *still enough, and as good left* [emphasis added]; and more than the as yet unprovided could use. So that, in effect, there was never the less for others because of his inclosure for himself: for he that leaves as much as another can make use of, does as good as take nothing at all. No body could consider himself injured by the drinking of another man, though he took a good draught, who had a whole river of the same water left to quench his thirst: and the case of land and water, where there is enough, is perfectly the same. (Locke, 1980, II.5.33)

[17] For how the count-as relation operates in contexts where individual behavior acquires illocutionary meaning see (Cuneo, 2014). Action-types that get to count as illocutions need not be locutionary (linguistic) in any robust sense. The important qualification is that in a normatively felicitous context a certain event or action gets to count as a normatively meaningful event or action. In our case, a physical act of obtaining or occupying an external resource counts as the act of coming to own what was previously unowned. For this counting-as relation to hold true of someone's actual behavior certain conditions need to be met including the normative condition that it is blameless or morally unobjectionable. This condition obtains when enough and as good to use or appropriate is left for others. Cuneo describes this relationship in strictly linguistic terms as follows: 'we can define the notion of count-generation (as it applies to actions) as follows: an agent's performing an action Φ *count-generates* his performing an action Ψ just in case his Φing generates his Ψing and his Φing counts as his Ψing (at least in part) in virtue of his Φing.' (Cuneo, 2014, p. 17-8).

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tions to remain ideally unsevered. Accordingly, on this backward-looking construal of original-title-conferring acts, their individuation as entitlement-generating becomes possible only if we *additionally* assume that coming to own the previously unowned is compossible with each person's remaining able to apply her agency on still unowned resources in a such as a way so as to attain the level of individual welfare that she could have obtained in a counterfactual world where all external resources remain unowned.

This is a constraint on the individuation of acts of primordial acquisition that, by virtue of a historical legitimation of title-conferring acts, remains valid for any subsequent action that brings about a change in one's private holdings. Any present and future act of making something one's private property that passes the muster for qualifying as an act of making something one's own must have encoded in its individuation profile the satisfaction of this normative criterion. To connect the dots that lead back to the beginning of this section, any attempt at making one's own what is previously unowned by depriving from others enough and as good to use or appropriate is or, more precisely, counts as a blameworthy interference with their free agency. Consequently, blameworthy interferences with others' agency raise issues of distributive injustice *when and because* they can be individuated as deprivations of the means for obtaining this primordial, pre-appropriation welfare level. Such cases of blameworthy interference with one's ability to use and/or appropriate enough and as good will trigger a libertarian principle of basic justice according to which no person living under a regime of private property rights should be unable to achieve the individual welfare level that would be feasible in a world in which all external resources remain unowned.

Accordingly, the only way in which a libertarian state can uphold this principle is to enact a policy scheme that *compensates* anyone who, in the current context of resource allocation, is otherwise unable to achieve this primordially defined level of welfare. Such compensatory actions on the part of a libertarian state stand in a special relation to any private, individual action of appropriation:

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they *perpetually restore or uphold the blameless character* of any historical chain of private interactions that have alarming distributive effects. As noted, for the libertarian, the only alarming distributive effect is the one that results from imputable deprivations of the means for each person's obtaining a primordial, pre-appropriation welfare level. Every single instance of compensating non-owners whereby the state seeks to correct the distribution of primordial welfare in response to one's inability to achieve the putative pre-appropriation welfare level is also *socially basic* action in the ontological sense discussed here. It is ontologically basic in the sense that what makes it the case that it is a socially basic action is the fact that it *exactly* conforms with the specific act-type that libertarian justice stipulates that we minimally owe to each other as members of a society, namely, *leaving for others enough and as good to use and/or appropriate* as they had before one appropriated a previously unowned thing.

What is basic about such state actions is encoded in their conditions of individuation: compensating for anyone's inability to access enough and as good resources as she would have been able to access in a world in which all external resources remained unowned *just is* a symbolically adorned way of holding the putative primordial appropriators responsible for not leaving others enough and as good to use and/or appropriate. The fact that voluntary transactions can, individually or in the aggregate, impair the primordial claim of other individuals to a minimum of external resources can, even accepting many of Nozick's libertarian assumptions, justify coercive efforts to undo some of the consequences of freely chosen transactions, including the distribution of social benefits. Nevertheless, any state action that would go beyond, say, running some program for the alleviation of extreme poverty would not count as a socially basic action because it would presumably result in the allocation of resources above the level of primordial welfare.[18] Put differently,

[18] It bears noting that any social assistance scheme under this conception would most likely fail to even remotely resemble the enactment of something like a *full* social minimum. As White (2021) aptly explains, for most, if not all, people the primordial welfare level:

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it would be an instance of impermissible institutional supererogation on the part of the libertarian minimal state that, in the eyes of its libertarian citizens, would impose losses upon property-owning individuals for the sake of impermissibly enforcing a conception of the overall social good.

The alternative conception of a minimal degree of social protection is much more forthcoming. Instead of trying to anchor the distributive situation to a proper description of imputable actions of original appropriation that are ex post corrected by institutional compensatory actions it focuses directly on the configuration of this situation as a complex state of affairs and asks which particular states of persons should be treated as a minimal threshold of human well-being, human development (capabilities), all-purpose means (resources, primary goods) etc. Questions about the actual or counterfactual profiles of individuals who exercise their agency in ways that may amount to a blameworthy interference with someone else's ability to use and appropriate enough and as good resources simply do not arise. The justice that matters here is justice of outcomes that can be good or bad, worthy of promotion or worthy of prevention. Nothing about the imputability of these outcomes matters for the evaluation of its justice. Accordingly, and this is what is most crucial for our discussion, nothing about what makes an original act of appropriation or subsequent act of compensation compatible with everyone's ability to have access to a primordial level of welfare is relevant for how to establish a threshold-type state of affairs below which political institutions must not allow citizens to fall.

[is] likely to be very low, precisely because it is the welfare level we could get in a world with no property rights regime to stabilize expectations about the use of resources and, therefore, a world without the huge productivity gains that come from stabilizing such expectations. Secondly, it is important to recall that [the primordial welfare level] will almost certainly vary across people according to the nature of their personal, self-owned capacities. Those who are born with a good endowment of productively applicable talents will obviously fare better in the state of nature, in which all external resources remain unowned, than, for example, those who are born with capacities that make it harder for them to engage in production.

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Robert Nozick reserved a name for accounts of this type that to this day remains the object of lively debate. For convenience, Nozick uses the terms 'end-result principle' and 'end-state principle' to refer to two importantly distinct situational variants of distributive justice. *Current time-slice* states of affairs are *synchronically* assessable for their distributive justice. We look at a select array of situations that obtain simultaneously without paying attention to whom these situations concern or affect or how these situations came about. According to a current time-slice principle, all that needs to be looked at, in judging the justice of a distribution, is who ends up with what. Nozick points out that a critical consequence of such a principle is that any two structurally isomorphic distributive outcomes are equally just. In his words, 'two distributions are structurally identical if they present the same profile, but perhaps have different persons occupying the particular slots. My having ten and your having five, and my having five and your having ten are structurally identical distributions.' (Nozick, 1974, p. 154). Any permutations in the distributive shares that compose a particular state of affairs do not make a normative difference. By contrast, *end-state* situations are *diachronically* assessable. We look at how distributions affect persons over a lifetime such that all we need to be concerned about is whether, for example, the lifetime incomes of Smith and Jones are unequal, insufficient or otherwise distributively problematic.

For the sake of not losing track of the orientation of our discussion it is important to keep in mind that, in general discussions about distributive justice, both synchronic and diachronic states of affairs are *comparatively* individuated. In other words, they are situations that do not hold true of a person independently of how they relate to the welfare, developmental or economic situation of other persons. Locutions such as "having as much as" or "being better off than" are intrinsically relative or comparative. Accordingly, to make a difference to how a person is situated with respect to her well-being, her real freedom to function or her access to all-purpose means is precisely to change her position relative to the welfare,

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capability or resource position of other persons. An improvement or deterioration of one's situation is a function of measurable changes in the situation of select others or everyone else. Different ways of commensurating the states of different persons will result from applying different metrics of distribution. For example, on a welfarist conception of distributive justice the relevant states will abide by the formula "being better off (or, perhaps more controversially, happier) than". On a capabilitarian conception the relevant states will abide by the formula "having a better or greater chance or opportunity to be or do certain things", whereas on a resourcist conception the relevant state will amount to comparisons of the form "having more than" or "affording more than".

This is an important feature of situation-centered theories of justice that has a direct bearing on the more specific discussion concerning the enactment of a social minimum. It would obviously make little if any sense to say that a minimally just individual state of affairs obtains only relative to the situation of certain others. *A* does not survive or subsist to a greater or lesser degree or at higher or lower level than *B*, nor does she possess a set of basic capabilities *X*, *Y* and *Z* to a greater or lesser degree, at higher or lower level than *B*, nor, of course off, does she possess a bundle of all-purpose means to a greater or lesser degree, at higher or lower level than *B*. Although the usual metrics of distributive justice—namely, welfare, capabilities and resources—are naturally amenable to comparative readings, it remains conceptually possible to work with their absolute or non-comparative counterparts. In the case of welfare such candidate counterparts could be survival and subsistence, in the case of capabilities it could be human functioning and in the case of resources it could be something like sustenance or (sustainable) livelihood.[19]

[19] Dorsey (2012, p. 4) defends his absolutist version which, like any other absolutist or non-comparative view, holds that 'to determine whether an absolute state holds of a person, one need only look to that person. Relative states are essentially comparative; they are states that cannot hold of a person independently of a comparison between that person and others. Relative states include "being equal," or "being better-off," etc.'. Accordingly, Dorsey endorses the idea that any theory that merits the name of a "theory of the social minimum"

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Depending on how low we decide to set the threshold of minimal social protection, states of persons that could serve as exemplary instantiations of a social minimum would be described by locutions such as "one's basic needs being met"[20], "subsistence being achieved"[21], "functioning qua human being" or "possessing capabilities X, Y or Z". These locutions are expectedly pitched at a considerably high level of abstraction or genericity and it always remains possible to rephrase them in terms of locutions that include measurable indices such as "possessing a list of basic capabilities"[22], "meeting a list of basic needs"[23] or "living above the International Poverty Line (IPL) or the Lower or Upper Middle Income Class Poverty Line"[24], "possessing a certain threshold level of primary

'will posit an absolute, non-comparative state and declare that this state is of special value. For example, though many views will hold that the state of "maintaining equality with others" is important for any person to achieve, such a state cannot constitute a basic minimum. A state of persons counts only as a basic minimum if that state could be possessed no matter one's place in the overall distribution, and no matter whether one has been made better- or worse-off over time, and no matter whether anyone else, or everyone else, also maintains that state.' (Dorsey, 2012, p. 4.)

[20] For Miller (2007, p. 181), basic needs are 'the conditions that must be met for a person to have a decent life given the environmental conditions he faces.' See, also, Griffin (1989, p. 42).

[21] The most important account of a basic minimum in terms of basic human subsistence is argued for by Henry Shue (1981, p. 23). For Shue, if any particular state of persons is to take moral priority, it must be subsistence:

By...subsistence, I mean unpolluted air, unpolluted water, adequate food, adequate clothing, adequate shelter, and minimal preventive public health care. Many complications about exactly how to specify the boundaries of what is necessary for subsistence would be interesting to explore. But the basic idea is to have available for consumption what is needed for a decent chance at a reasonably healthy and active life of more or less normal length, barring tragic interventions. This central idea is clear enough to work with, even though disputes can occur over exactly where to draw its outer boundaries.

[22] According to Martha Nussbaum there are ten basic human capabilities whose possession at a basic threshold is required for a life worthy of human dignity. See Nussbaum (2006, pp. 76–8).

[23] As an absolute concept of poverty directed at mere physical wellbeing, the basic needs approach has for a long time dominated development policy, and the income associated with the basic needs threshold became the official poverty line of the International Labor Organization in 1976 (Jolly 1976). Later, it was replaced by Amartya Sen's "Human Development Approach", shifting the focus from consumption to "capabilities". For an overview of a basic needs approach to defining the social minimum threshold see Pölzler (2021).

[24] In October 2015, the World Bank updated the the global absolute minimum to $1.90 per day. As for the Lower Middle Income Class Poverty Line it currently has a value

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goods or resources", "living a good life to some specified threshold degree".

V. Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has sought to demonstrate that the concept of the "social minimum" should not be regarded as a straightforward distributive principle, but rather as a normatively and ontologically contested terrain structured by divergent philosophical commitments. What appears, at first glance, to be a modest concern with guaranteeing a minimally decent life, in fact, opens onto the deepest questions of justice: the relation between rights and duties of citizenship, the normative priority of equality and sufficiency, and the ontological grounding of justice in either actions or outcomes.

The first observation to be drawn is that the "social" dimension of the minimum is not reducible to a single qualifying attribute. To characterize the minimum as "civic" emphasizes obligations of reciprocity, whereas to frame it in terms of public or common goods invokes issues of access, sustainability, and the collective management of non-excludable resources. These are not merely semantic variations but reflect distinct normative orientations. At stake is whether the minimum is primarily conceived as enabling civic participation, securing access to non-excludable goods, or ensuring a background condition of social membership independent of contribution.

A second point of contention arises from the distinction between the "minimum" and the "basic." As argued, these terms encode distinct distributive standards. "Basic" typically carries egalitarian connotations, emphasizing equal shares of primary goods, capabilities, or opportunities. "Minimum," by contrast, more often

of US$3.20 PPP (purchasing power parity), whereas the Upper Middle Income Class Poverty Line has a value of US$5.50 PPP. See https://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/home (last visit 15/3/2022).

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reflects a sufficientarian orientation, where justice requires that all individuals achieve a threshold of decency, even if inequalities persist above that line. This normative demarcation is not merely theoretical but has substantial distributive implications. Egalitarian interpretations demand more expansive redistributive measures aimed at equalizing conditions of life, while sufficientarian accounts permit stratification provided that no individual falls below the requisite threshold. The analysis suggests that rather than being mutually exclusive, these standards may be understood as layered: sufficiency defines the floor below which justice fails, while equality sets the aspirational horizon for a more robust conception of distributive fairness. This dual orientation reconciles the sufficientarian insistence on urgency with the egalitarian concern for structural parity.

A third axis of differentiation concerns the ontological status of the minimum. Action-oriented accounts, exemplified by libertarian theories, evaluate justice with reference to the blamelessness of individual or collective actions. On this view, distributions are just if holdings result from legitimate acquisitions, transfers, or rectifications, irrespective of the distributive profile of the outcome. By contrast, outcome-oriented theories evaluate justice in terms of synchronic or diachronic states of affairs. On these views, distributive arrangements are just or unjust depending on whether individuals meet threshold conditions of welfare, resources, or capabilities, regardless of the causal pathways by which those states were produced. The libertarian attempt to reconcile action-orientation with distributive minima through the Lockean proviso highlights both the potential and the limitations of this approach. While the proviso requires that appropriations leave "enough and as good" for others, its backward-looking structure renders it ill-suited to address the complex and structural dynamics of contemporary economies, where patterns of exclusion emerge less from discrete acts of appropriation than from systemic configurations.

The foregoing analysis suggests that the social minimum should be understood less as a fixed distributive formula than as a prism refracting the central dilemmas of political philosophy. Competing

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framings of the minimum foreground different principles of justice: reciprocity, sufficiency, equality, agency, or outcome. The difficulty, therefore, lies not in identifying the "correct" conception, but in adjudicating between rival principles in contexts where they point to divergent prescriptions. This observation has direct implications for policy. Proposals for a universal basic income (Van Parijs 1992; Ackerman & Alstott 1999; Widerquist 2013) exemplify sufficientarian reasoning, offering unconditional guarantees that secure subsistence irrespective of contribution. Yet critics argue that such schemes risk undermining civic reciprocity or displacing public services (Stirling 2019). Conversely, proposals for universal basic services (Leff et al. 2019) highlight the public goods dimension but raise concerns about individual preference satisfaction and bureaucratic rigidity. These debates cannot be resolved without attending to the conceptual distinctions elaborated above.

What follows from this inquiry is that the social minimum should be conceived as a plural, rather than monolithic, normative construct. Competing framings are not reducible to one another but reflect legitimate moral concerns. An adequate account of distributive justice must therefore adopt a pluralist orientation, recognizing that different contexts may prioritize different values: sufficiency in contexts of extreme deprivation, equality in contexts of entrenched hierarchy, reciprocity in contexts of civic obligation, and outcome-orientation in contexts of structural exclusion. This pluralism, however, need not entail relativism.

The analysis confirms that the "social minimum" should be understood as the minimal expression of distributive justice, but also as its normative foundation. To secure that no one falls below a sufficient threshold is to provide the conditions of possibility for citizenship, autonomy, and participation. Yet such sufficiency alone is not exhaustive of justice. Equality, reciprocity, and solidarity remain essential for a more robust conception of a just society. Accordingly, the social minimum ought to be seen not as the terminus of justice but as its necessary point of departure. To ensure sufficiency is to secure the baseline from which more demanding distributive ideals

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can be pursued. The social minimum, therefore, is best interpreted as a threshold concept: indispensable for the legitimacy of political institutions, but insufficient as a comprehensive account of justice. Its normative importance lies precisely in its dual character — as a minimal floor of decency and as the platform for further egalitarian or solidaristic aspirations.

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