

A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of several modern skyscrapers with glass facades, converging towards the top of the frame against a pale sky. The perspective creates a sense of height and scale.

HAVING Too MUCH

PHILOSOPHICAL
ESSAYS ON
LIMITARIANISM

EDITED BY
INGRID ROBEYNS



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8. Presumptive Limitarianism: A Reply to Robert Huseby

Dick Timmer

1. Introduction

According to limitarianism, there is an upper limit to the amount of wealth that people can permissibly have (Robeyns 2017; 2022; Timmer 2021a). In earlier work on limitarianism, I have proposed *presumptive limitarianism*, according to which limitarianism is justified when decision-makers are unaware of or disagree about the appropriate distributive criterion or if they are unaware of people's relevant features (or both) (Timmer 2021a, 765–771).¹ However, in an insightful criticism of presumptive limitarianism, Robert Huseby (2022, 244–246) raises a number of powerful objections to this view. Some of these objections call for a revision of my defence of presumptive limitarianism while others call for clarification, both of which I aim to do in this chapter.

This chapter is structured as follows. In Section 2, I repeat and further clarify the main idea behind presumptive limitarianism. In

1 More precisely, I argued that when decision-makers are unaware of the appropriate distributive criterion (or if disagreement about that criterion exists), they should defend limitarianism as a mid-level principle (Timmer, 2021a, 763–765). And when they are unaware of people's relevant features, they should defend limitarianism as a presumption (Timmer, 2021a, 765–771). I will now argue explicitly that presumptive limitarianism can be defended as a mid-level principle as well, because it can draw support from an incompletely theorized agreement (see Sections 3 and 5). Because of that, I will now say that decision-makers should apply presumptive limitarianism if they are unaware of or disagree about the appropriate distributive criterion or if they are unaware of people's relevant features (or both).

the subsequent sections, I discuss Huseby's objections to the three arguments I offered in support of presumptive limitarianism. In Section 3, I discuss the presumptive–egalitarian argument. In Section 4, I discuss the surplus argument. In Section 4, I discuss the epistemic argument. Section 5 concludes.

2. Presumptive Limitarianism Restated and Refined

I want to start by summarizing and clarifying the main idea behind presumptive limitarianism. My account of presumptive limitarianism takes its cue from an article by Juha Räikkä (2019) titled “On the Presumption of Equality”. Räikkä argues in favour of an *egalitarian presumption*, according to which “[w]hen an allocative agent is unaware either of the appropriate distributive criterion or people's relevant features (or both) and she cannot postpone the allocation, then she should distribute goods equally, given that the relevant information is not easily available and that her ignorance is not her own fault” (Räikkä 2019, 810). Similarly, I wanted to examine whether allocative agents, or ‘decision-makers’, should apply limitarian principles when they are unaware of or disagree about the appropriate distributive criterion or people's relevant features (or both). If so, should they prevent people from exceeding some upper limit? I argued that the answer to this question is Yes.

I define presumptive limitarianism as follows, and I will unpack this view below:

Presumptive limitarianism. Unless decision-makers have substantive reasons to suggest otherwise, they must act as if there is an upper limit to the amount of wealth that people can permissibly have.²

2 This definition is adapted from the one I have previously provided (Timmer 2021a, 765). The original formulation is as follows:

Presumptive limitarianism. Without substantive reasons to the contrary, we have reasons to regard a distribution as unjust if some people's wealth exceeds the limitarian threshold.

Huseby's objections apply equally to either formulation of presumptive limitarianism, so the revised definition does not matter for the discussion of his argument. However, I prefer the revised formulation because it focusses on presumptive limitarianism as a view about how decision-makers must act if they are unaware of or disagree about the appropriate distributive criterion and/or people's relevant features. Moreover, it defines presumptive limitarianism not solely as a

Put differently, presumptive limitarianism holds that unless decision-makers are aware of the appropriate distributive criterion and people's relevant features, they must act as if there is an upper limit to the amount of wealth that people can permissibly have. The role of such a presumption is to be "a risk-averse principle that aims to minimize the possible harm of a decision given the prior beliefs and evidence available to the decision-maker" (Timmer 2021a, 765).

I should clarify my use of the labels 'substantive' and 'presumptive' when distinguishing between different distributive principles. I say that decision-makers should apply substantive principles if there is agreement about the appropriate distributive criterion and if they are aware of people's relevant features. If they are unaware of or disagree about the appropriate distributive criterion or people's relevant features (or both), then presumptive principles must be applied. Importantly, however, in our world it will seldom be the case that decision-makers have either complete knowledge about these things, or a complete lack thereof. So, decision-makers will likely have to combine and weigh both substantive reasons and presumptive reasons when assessing different distributive scenarios (Timmer 2021a, 770).³ The more decision-makers are aware of or agree about the appropriate distributive criterion and people's relevant features, the less weight needs to be given to presumptive reasons. And the less they are aware of the appropriate distributive criterion and people's relevant features, the stronger the weight of presumptive reasons. Having said this, I leave this issue aside in the remainder of this article because it has little bearing on my discussion of Huseby's objections. But it fits into a much broader and important debate about how and which distributive principles can offer guidance in the real world; a debate I can only briefly touch on here.⁴

principle of justice but also as a moral principle that could have implications in political philosophy and ethics more generally. Having said that, I endorse both definitions of presumptive limitarianism.

- 3 For example, we may know that Ann works more hours than Bob, but we may not know whether they put in the same amount of effort. If we distributed wealth on the basis of working hours and effort, then we would need to combine a substantive principle with a presumptive principle in this case (and the same holds for other distributive principles).
- 4 See also Robeyns' (2022, 251–253) distinction between 'theory-driven political philosophy' and 'problem-driven political philosophy'. On ideal theory and non-ideal theory more generally, see Valentini (2012).

We can distinguish presumptions from other types of distributive principles by focussing on when exactly presumptive principles are supposed to offer guidance. For this purpose, it may be helpful to examine two examples of legal presumptions.⁵ To start with, the presumption of innocence states that we must treat someone as if they are innocent until they are proven guilty. As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: “Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defense.” This means that anyone accused of any crime must be considered innocent until proven guilty, which often means that their guilt must be proven beyond a reasonable doubt. If their guilt is proven beyond a reasonable doubt, then the presumption of innocence no longer applies. Subsequently, the presumption of death states that a person can be declared to be dead even if no undeniable proof of their death can be provided. This presumption no longer applies if it is shown that this person is in fact alive (or dead). Presumptions apply, then, until decisive opposing evidence or arguments are given against them.

In distributive justice, presumptions apply when decision-makers lack substantive reasons to favour certain distributive outcomes; that is, they apply if decision-makers are unaware of or disagree about the appropriate distributive criterion or people’s relevant features (or both). For example, if wealth is to be distributed on the basis of who is more deserving but it is unknown to decision-makers whether Ann or Bob is more deserving, we cannot distribute wealth on this basis. Similarly, if it is unknown whether Ann or Bob lives in deprivation, the principle that people should be free from deprivation cannot be straightforwardly applied. Alternatively, if we know everything there is to know about Ann and Bob but we are unaware of or disagree about the correct distributive criterion, presumptions can offer guidance as well. In all of these cases, decision-makers must think about which distribution of wealth between Ann and Bob is presumptively just, that is, which distribution would “minimize the possible harm of a decision given the prior beliefs and evidence available to the decision-maker” (Timmer 2021a, 765). Presumptive limitarianism, then, holds that if decision-makers are

5 These examples are from Räikkä (2019, 810–812).

unaware of or disagree about the appropriate distributive criterion or people's relevant features (or both), they must say that there is an upper limit to the amount of wealth that people can permissibly have in order to minimize the possible harm of a decision given the prior beliefs and evidence available to the decision-makers.

I should note that some of my arguments about presumptive limitarianism support much higher thresholds than those detailed in Robeyns' (or others') account.⁶ For example, below I will argue that when decision-makers are unable to determine an accurate threshold for epistemic reasons, they can at least be sure that billionaires are above it. However, Robeyns' flourishing threshold is much lower than this threshold (Robeyns 2017, 14–30). Moreover, the wealth limit in presumptive limitarianism can also be *lower* than the threshold proposed in other accounts. For example, I argue below that one argument for presumptive limitarianism is that people might have wealth that has too little value for the holder to justify them keeping it rather than redistributing it. Depending on the weight of our reasons for redistributing wealth, this might suggest a limitarian threshold that is lower than Robeyns' threshold for a fully flourishing life.⁷

In what follows, I will defend the three arguments I have proposed in favour of presumptive limitarianism and which have been criticized by Huseby. The presumptive-egalitarian argument claims that presumptive limitarianism should be endorsed because other presumptive principles support it (Timmer 2021a, 766–767). The surplus argument claims that presumptive limitarianism should be endorsed because some people have surplus wealth, which is wealth that lacks moral value for the holder or has too little value for the holder to justify them keeping it rather than redistributing it (Timmer 2021a, 767–68). The epistemic argument says that if decision-makers are unaware of people's relevant features (for example because it is unknown to them how deserving people are of their wealth), then it is presumptively just to impose an upper limit on how much wealth people can have (Timmer 2021a, 768–769).

6 I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

7 I have addressed the question of how to determine the level of the limitarian threshold extensively elsewhere. See Timmer (2021b, 115–133).

3. The Presumptive–Egalitarian Argument

My first argument for presumptive limitarianism was that if one endorses presumptive egalitarianism—the view that if it is unknown whether unequal distributions are justified, goods should be distributed equally—then one should endorse presumptive limitarianism. This is because “presumptive limitarianism is likely to reduce or at least constrain objectionable inequality by setting an upper threshold on how much wealth people can have” (Timmer 2021a, 766–767). Therefore, I argued that the egalitarian presumption “supports presumptive limitarianism by implication” (Timmer 2021a, 766). For reasons I will discuss below, Huseby rightly shows that this argument fails: presumptive egalitarianism does not conceptually imply presumptive limitarianism. However, his objections suggest a stronger and revised version of this argument: that presumptive limitarianism should be endorsed as a mid-level principle because other presumptive principles *support* it, even though it does not conceptually follow from these principles.

Huseby (2022, 244–245) targets the claim that the egalitarian presumption supports presumptive limitarianism by implication. His first argument is that the egalitarian presumption can favour more egalitarian distributions than the limitarian presumption. Presumptive limitarianism allows for large inequalities below the threshold, whereas presumptive egalitarianism does not. Second, Huseby argues that if initial holdings are taken into account, presumptive egalitarianism might require that some people exceed the limitarian threshold. Suppose person A is almost at the limitarian threshold whereas person B is not. If additional wealth must be distributed evenly between A and B, then A might exceed the limitarian threshold when they receive their equal share. Presumptive egalitarianism, Huseby argues, supports this outcome, whereas limitarianism does not.

I believe Huseby is both wrong and right here. He is wrong in the sense that presumptive egalitarianism would, arguably, reject distributing additional wealth evenly no matter the initial distribution and even if some people have large amounts of wealth. Unlike Huseby (2022, 245) suggests, presumptive egalitarians should, in my view, be sensitive to

initial holdings as well.⁸ Many progressive tax schemes favoured by egalitarians tax more of someone's additional wealth if they are already very wealthy. These and similar policies are egalitarian not because they distribute additional goods equally, but because they distribute additional goods in such a way that existing inequalities are tempered. For any reasonably high limitarian threshold, then, such as Robeyns' threshold above which people can live a fully flourishing life (Robeyns 2017, 14–30), it seems that egalitarians too have good reasons to say that equality does not require giving equal additional shares to people just below that threshold and to people well below that threshold. Instead, egalitarianism is likely to give more weight to those who are worse off.

But Huseby rightly points out that presumptive egalitarians are not committed to presumptive limitarianism. I agree with this. A commitment to presumptive egalitarianism does not conceptually imply a commitment to presumptive limitarianism. But although I am very much sympathetic to Huseby's objection that wealth limits do not logically follow from a commitment to equality, this suggests a revision of the presumptive–egalitarian argument: presumptive limitarianism should be endorsed because other presumptive principles support it, even though it does not conceptually follow from these principles.

Recall the phrasing of the presumptive–egalitarian argument. As Huseby (2022, 244–245) points out, it claims that presumptive egalitarianism “supports presumptive limitarianism by implication” (Timmer 2021a, 766). Huseby's objection focusses on the claim about implication, that is, on what follows from a commitment to presumptive egalitarianism. And he raises the point that the egalitarian presumption does not imply the limitarian presumption. However, we can still maintain that presumptive egalitarians have strong reasons to support presumptive limitarianism. Aside from defending limitarianism as a presumptive principle, I have also argued that limitarianism is a mid-level principle (Timmer 2021a, 763–765). As a mid-level principle, limitarianism can draw support from an ‘incompletely theorized agreement’, which occurs when there is agreement about which outcomes or aims to pursue but disagreement about the underlying rationale concerning why these particular outcomes or aims must be

8 Huseby (2022, 245) suggests that presumptive egalitarianism might be sensitive to initial holdings but rejects that this is the case for desert-based egalitarian principles.

pursued (Sunstein 1995). Presumptive egalitarians might, following this idea, endorse presumptive limitarianism not because it corresponds with their underlying theory of justice, but because it promotes outcomes or aims that they care about. Presumptive limitarianism can promote egalitarian concerns because presumptive limitarianism can be endorsed by egalitarians and other distributive justice theorists alike, such as prioritarists and sufficientarians. For example, in the earlier article I argued as follows:

Both sufficientarians and prioritarists [...] can agree that justice requires the eradication of poverty and support for policies and institutions which aim to do so, including limitarian policies. However, for sufficientarians the ground for such limitarianism is that the poor live below the sufficiency threshold; yet prioritarists support limitarianism because the poor have weighted priority. Limitarian midlevel principles bypass such foundational disagreement and enable agreement about normative commitments in specific cases (Timmer 2021a, 763).

Hence, presumptive limitarianism might draw support from a variety of different perspectives. The value of limitarianism as a mid-level principle, then, relies in its ability to elicit an incompletely theorized agreement on what justice requires regarding the distribution of wealth.

In my view, then, the question is whether presumptive egalitarianism provides strong reasons to support presumptive limitarianism in “circumstances characterized by wealth inequality, unequal political power, extreme poverty, and disruptive climate change” (Timmer 2021a, 763), which are the circumstances in which limitarianism is supposed to provide guidance. Presumptive egalitarians can support views that will bring them closer to their favoured goal, even if this sometimes leads to outcomes that they do not find entirely satisfying. This is similar to how rule-consequentialists can endorse certain rules even if in some cases they render their outcomes suboptimal. Arguably, various views about justice, both distributive and otherwise, could support wealth limits, at least presumptively. One such view is that distributions which allow extreme wealth are more likely to undermine political liberty and equality of opportunity, foster a status hierarchy, domination and exploitation, and leave hundreds of millions of people in extreme poverty even if they could benefit from redistributive policies.

Hence, presumptive egalitarians can and probably should endorse presumptive limitarianism when decision-makers are unaware of or disagree about the appropriate distributive criterion or people's relevant features (or both), not because it is an *implication* of their view, but because it is likely to reduce objectionable inequality. From the point of view of presumptive egalitarianism, a world in which presumptive limitarianism is implemented is preferable to a world in which it is not.

4. The Surplus Argument

The second argument for presumptive limitarianism is the *surplus argument* (Timmer 2021a, 767–768). The surplus argument holds that presumptive limitarianism is justified if some people have surplus wealth, which is wealth that lacks moral value for the holder or has too little value for the holder to justify them keeping it over redistributing it (Timmer 2021a, 761; see also Robeyns 2022, 254–255). The idea behind this argument is that one might hold—and, in my view, with good reason—that in our world some people do in fact have surplus wealth, thus defined. In November 2021, Elon Musk became the first person to be worth more than \$300 billion, according to Forbes. It is quite unlikely, to put it mildly, that such wealth can be justified on the basis of common principles of distributive justice, such as egalitarianism, prioritarianism, or sufficientarianism, or an account of need or individual freedom.⁹ Taxing such wealth and redistributing it is likely to raise significant benefits without incurring many costs. Because of this, the surplus argument states that saying that there is an upper limit to the amount of wealth that people can permissibly have is more likely to be just than not doing so. To make this more concrete, it holds that taxing the wealth of billionaires is more likely to promote justice—both distributive and otherwise—rather than hamper it.

Huseby's main objection to the surplus argument is that it draws on sufficientarian reasoning, because, as he puts it, the argument “only holds on the assumption that sub-threshold wealth or goods are morally valuable, or at least more valuable than wealth or goods above the threshold. If so, the ‘limitarian claim’ is (again), really a

9 For an alternative view, see Flanigan and Freiman (2022).

sufficientarian claim" (Huseby 2022, 245). However, this objection is mistaken.¹⁰ Limitarianism need not commit to the claim that everything that happens below the threshold is more valuable, from the standpoint of justice, than what happens above the threshold, and that this justifies redistributing above-threshold wealth. It only requires us to say that at least *some* improvements below the threshold are more valuable, for example because they allow urgent needs to be met or promote political equality, and that at least as far as wealth *above* the threshold is concerned, redistribution can likely happen without significant costs to those from whom these goods are taken. But limitarianism only provides a partial account of justice which focusses on where resources can be taken from without incurring morally significant damage, or at least with a low likelihood of incurring such damage. Hence, the objection that limitarianism is a form of sufficientarianism should be rejected.

However, we can distil another objection to the surplus argument from Huseby's discussion of presumptive limitarianism. According to Huseby, it is

hard to understand what a limitarian threshold refers to at all, if limitarianism is not itself supposed to be a substantive principle of distributive justice. It is, however, a premise for Timmer's discussion that limitarianism is not a substantive principle of justice, and that the limitarian presumption is valid and useful across a range of possible substantive and ideal principles that are not themselves limitarian (Huseby 2022, 245).

Huseby argues that the 'limitarian threshold' does not denote anything if it is not a substantive principle, such as that provided by Robeyns' account of the fully flourishing life. This puts pressure on the surplus argument as an argument for presumptive limitarianism. The surplus argument maintains that it is presumptively just to redistribute wealth that lacks moral value for the holder or has too little value for the holder to justify them keeping it rather than redistributing it (Timmer 2021a, 767–768). However, decision-makers need not apply presumptive limitarianism if they are aware of this. For example, if someone has \$300 billion while hundreds of millions of people are living in extreme poverty, it is unjust, if anything is, to say that the billionaire should have

10 On the relationship between sufficientarianism and limitarianism, see also Robeyns (2022, 261–64).

even more wealth if this does not benefit those below the poverty line. However, *presumptive* reasoning plays no role here because in this case we know both the appropriate distributive criterion (namely: eradicating poverty) and people's relevant features (namely: one person has billions of dollars whereas others live in deprivation). By saying that someone has surplus wealth, decision-makers therefore seem to be aware both of the appropriate distributive criterion and the relevant features of this person.

However, the surplus argument can still play some role in justifying presumptive limitarianism. For example, even if there is uncertainty about the exact level at which wealth becomes surplus wealth, presumptive limitarianism can offer guidance. Such uncertainty might arise, for example, due to an underlying uncertainty about the correct theory of justice or because the limitarian threshold is too vague to offer guidance in all the relevant cases. Despite this, it may still be argued that at least some people have surplus wealth, namely on the basis of the low likelihood that their wealth contributes to something that is morally valuable—and that claim, which draws on the likelihood that such wealth has (enough) moral value for the holder to justify them keeping it, is a presumptive claim. That is, even if there is uncertainty about the exact level of the limitarian threshold, there is a presumptive case for redistributing at least some wealth of the super-rich on the basis that this is unlikely to harm them but may provide significant justice-relevant improvements.

5. The Epistemic Argument

The third argument for presumptive limitarianism, the 'epistemic argument', says that if decision-makers are unaware of people's relevant features (for example because they do not know how deserving people are of their wealth), then it is presumptively just to impose an upper limit to how much wealth people can have.

Many distributive principles, such as allocating according to marginal productivity or desert, require knowledge about people's relative merit or some other feature of an individual (Timmer 2021a, 768–769). Let us assume for now that decision-makers are unaware of these features. This may be the case for a variety of reasons, such as technological boundaries that limit the type and amount of information

that can be acquired, or ethical concerns (e.g. privacy or objections to shameful revelations) about the gathering of data by corporations and authorities. Because of this, decision-makers may be unable to calculate people's marginal productivity or another factor according to which they should have more or less wealth. We might not know, say, how many hours Ann and Bob work, how talented they are, what their individual contribution is to some collective achievement, and so forth. Or we might not know whether or not one of them is deprived of some valuable goods, such as housing or access to basic medical care. Without access to that information, decision-makers must act on the basis of presumptive principles.

Presumptive limitarianism can be justified on such epistemic grounds. If, for example, justice is concerned with securing political equality and meeting people's urgent needs, which are the two main moral concerns Robeyns mentioned when introducing limitarianism, then we can ask whether limiting the amount of wealth that people can permissibly have is more likely to promote securing political equality and meeting people's urgent needs. And we can do this even if we are unaware of people's relevant features.

Drawing on the arguments about meeting urgent needs and promoting political equality, I have argued elsewhere that a distribution in which neither Ann nor Bob "exceeds the limitarian threshold is more likely to be compatible with political equality and meeting urgent needs than a distribution in which one of them does exceed that threshold" (Timmer 2021a, 769). The level of the limitarian threshold, in this case, is determined by assessing when people's wealth exceeds a threshold above which redistributing additional wealth is likely to promote political equality and allow urgent needs to be met (other limitarians might, of course, draw on different reasons).

Huseby's objection to the epistemic argument for presumptive limitarianism is that it does not support presumptive limitarianism in particular. He says:

There is no reason to think that the limitarian presumption is better at minimizing misallocation, given the goals of political equality and meeting urgent needs, than either the egalitarian presumption or a possible sufficientarian presumption (Huseby 2022, 246).

However, much hinges on what 'better than' references. Huseby is right in saying that the limitarian presumption would have the same aim as an egalitarian presumption or a sufficientarian presumption. And in some cases, these latter presumptive principles would be preferable because they pursue intrinsic values directly (namely by promoting equality or eradicating deficiency) rather than indirectly (namely by limiting wealth). For example, in a perfectly sufficientarian society or in a perfectly egalitarian society, the goals of securing enough for everyone and protecting political equality are better met than in a perfectly limitarian society. This is because limitarianism is agnostic with respect to how wealth is distributed below the maximum threshold, so it might allow for inequalities that do not ensure that urgent needs are met.

Moreover, to the extent that they are comprehensive conceptions of justice, egalitarianism and sufficientarianism rank different states of the world, whereas limitarianism only focusses on the super-rich. Comprehensive conceptions of justice specify when something is an improvement and how to prioritize between different morally valuable aims. Limitarianism, on the other hand, only offers partial guidance and only under certain empirical conditions. And it does not stand on its own. The core limitarian idea that there is an upper limit to the amount of wealth that people can permissibly have must be embedded in a more general conception of justice. That is, limitarianism is in an important sense less comprehensive than these other views.

However, distributive principles can be 'better than' other distributive principles on other grounds as well. Though I agree with Huseby that egalitarian or sufficientarian presumptions can also be used to address urgent needs or promote political equality, that does not mean that presumptive limitarianism has no role to play. For one thing, realizing a perfectly sufficientarian society or a perfectly egalitarian society might be much less feasible than realizing a limitarian society, so we might ask which society we can reasonably aim to realize in light of a commitment to sufficiency or equality. And even *if* the aim is to realize a sufficientarian or egalitarian society, presumptive limitarianism can be valuable because it offers a partial answer to the question of who will pay for the policies and institutional changes required to realize such a sufficientarian or egalitarian society.

There are at least two additional reasons why presumptive limitarianism is valuable as a principle of distributive justice. First, given the declining marginal utility of additional wealth, unjust misallocations of wealth are more likely to be avoided by focussing on those at the upper end of the distribution. So presumptive limitarianism is valuable when thinking about what justice requires from the richest members of society. In doing so, it considers them first and foremost to be duty-bearers of justice rather than recipients of justice. Along similar lines, Robeyns distinguishes two reasons for focussing on surplus wealth and the upper end of the distribution, namely that it allows us to focus on the wasteful allocation of wealth at the upper end of the distribution and because those who hold large amounts of wealth have the capacity to contribute more to the provision of public goods and the pursuit of public values (Robeyns 2022, 263). Moreover, limitarianism offers guidance on theorizing about policies that aim to curb wealth specifically, such as via wealth taxes or inheritance taxation. This is different from presumptive egalitarianism and presumptive sufficientarianism, which target a much larger portion of the distribution and are much more encompassing distributive ideals.

Second, presumptive limitarianism focusses on the distribution of wealth at the upper end of the distribution and is less demanding than other distributive ideals, for example because it does not require lifting people above its threshold. For that reason, it can be combined with various other principles of distributive justice (Robeyns 2022, 265–266; Hickey, this volume). Even if everything entailed in presumptive limitarianism could be entailed by presumptive egalitarianism and presumptive sufficientarianism, the argumentative burden for presumptive limitarianism is different.

Let me put this point differently. Huseby says that limitarianism can be reduced to other kinds of principles, including egalitarianism, prioritarianism, sufficientarianism, and utilitarianism. But this assumed indistinctiveness is also a strength of the view—as becomes clear if limitarianism is defended as a mid-level principle. There is epistemic uncertainty with respect to which foundational theory of justice is correct or preferable. Yet if quite a few different theories support limitarianism, then this is a strong reason to endorse it, regardless of what other commitments these different theories have. Limitarianism is valuable *precisely because* it can be supported by those different principles

and precisely because its distributive implications resonate with those different principles.

6. Conclusion

According to presumptive limitarianism, unless decision-makers are aware of the appropriate distributive criterion and people's relevant features, they must act as if there is an upper limit to the amount of wealth that people can permissibly have. Huseby has raised a number of powerful objections to this view, which I have tried to address in this article. Both here and in earlier work, I have argued that presumptive limitarianism offers a plausible response to epistemic uncertainty in the real world and against the background of the actual wealth inequality in many contemporary societies. Though there is considerable epistemic uncertainty with respect to the correct foundational theory of justice, many of these theories support presumptive limitarianism. In the context of the societal challenges raised by wealth inequality, with which egalitarians and other distributive theories must also grapple, presumptive limitarianism holds that unless decision-makers have substantive reasons to suggest otherwise, they must act as if there is an upper limit to the amount of wealth that people can permissibly have.

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